**Quest for Economic Independence in Willa Cather’s My Antonia**

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Willa Sibert Cather is an eminent author from the United States. She is known for her depictions of the U.S. life in the novels such as ‘O Pioneers!’, ‘My Antonia’ and ‘Death Comes for the Archbishop’. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the quest for economic independence in Willa Cather’s My Antonia. Economic independence is about expanding the capacity of women to make genuine choices about their lives through full and equal participation in all spheres of life. It is about recognizing women’s work, paid and unpaid, as valuable, both socially and economically. It is about having policies and systems that value and celebrate women’s contributions, and reflect the reality of women’s lives.

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Pulitzer Prize winner Cather’s place in contemporary cultural politics may well be that the first lady of the United States, Laura Bush, featured her work as part of a White House symposium on the literary legacy of women in the American West in September 2002.

Cather was a writer who emerged at a transitional moment in the evolution of American Culture, and the complexity of her work results from her responses to this shifting historical milieu. She was an American of the late Victorian period and she lived her early life in the relatively provincial backwater of rural Nebraska. This was a time of considerable political ferment that was formative in shaping her fiction’s social and political magnitude.

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As she spent her childhood with the immigrants, she had the first-hand knowledge of their lives on the prairie land. In all of her novels she illustrated the pioneers’ life style, their hardships and their social, economical surroundings. As a child, she moved with her family to Webster county Nebraska. It might be that as a child Cather regarded the natural features of Nebraska as something to be conquered. Something entirely new and beautiful, Nebraska provided the material she needed to become a truly authentic American author. As she once told an interviewer:

“Of course, Nebraska is a storehouse of literary material everywhere is a storehouse of literary material. If a true artist was born in a pigpen and raised in a sty, he would still find plenty of inspiration for his work. The only need is the eye to see.”

This does not mean, of course that Cather was an unimaginative writer. However, like many authors she was a keen observer of life. She had a talent for noticing minute details and saving them for later. It was her talent with words—not just her verisimilitude—that made her the celebrated author she was.

Willa Cather early in life realized that achieving in the world was a male prerogative. Passivity, lack of assertiveness and energy, were traditionally the lot of the female, from childhood Willa was determined to achieve and she made her female characters like herself. She illustrated pioneer’s social, cultural and economic problems which they had to face in the yearly years of their settlement. Female characters of her novels are like New Women who despite or perhaps because of their wealth exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own; who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic. The aim of this paper is to show the quest for economic freedom of pioneer women in one of her best novels, My Antonia.

Economic independence is about expanding the capacity of women to make genuine choices about their lives through full and equal participation in all spheres of life. It is about recognizing women’s work, paid and unpaid, as valuable, both socially and economically. It is about having policies and systems that value and celebrate women’s contributions, and reflect the reality of women’s lives. Her ideas about economics, many of them, might develop easily enough from her experience of life in a capitalist society. Some of them, however, were recent additions to economic theory. Working knowledge of these ideas was rare, except among professional economists.

Willa Cather has depicted freedom in every walk of life like; freedom is linked with friendship, movement, labor, education, and gender in My Antonia. Freedom of movement brings the characters from their previous homes to the opportunities offered by Nebraska. Friendships are a result of choice; the right to choose the kind and quality of work one does leads to economic freedom. The freedom to learn and improve one’s mind provides personal progress for characters. The social and
economic mobility of both men and women leads to freedom in the market-place and choice of life style.

Many women characters appear in fiction that have been damaged by or disintegrated under the stresses of life. Just as in life, however, many fictional characters survive, adapt, and triumph; these characters may never be recognized within a larger world, but they are vitally important to other characters and are the objects of deep love and respect. Creating this woman in fiction can often be difficult, because the writer must present a whole character, not one trivialized by sentimentality or stereotyped by convention. Willa Cather in My Antonia has developed such characters.

A major twentieth century writer, Willa Cather created some of our most vibrant portraits of American women, Alexandra Bergson, Myra Henshawe, Thea Kronborg, Marian Forrester and the immortal Antonia. The unsentimental stories of their strengths and failures have a special relevance for our time. Willa Cather had written My Antonia to present these immigrants life goals.

My Antonia, one of Cather’s best works, is an unconventional, romantic novel of prairie life. It tells the story of a remarkable woman whose strength and passion epitomize the pioneer spirit. In My Antonia, Willa Cather presents Antonia as the powerful ideal of America. As a hardworking, productive, cosmopolitan immigrant, who is able to move forward by embracing new and old traditions, Antonia embodies all that Cather potentially sees in the American Dream. Through one specific passage, Cather develops powerful themes to emphasize the importance of the feminine traditional role in America by casting Antonia as mother Eve: one who possesses knowledge, goodness, and, most importantly, productivity.

Antonia moves to Nebraska from Bohemia with the rest of her family in her early teenage years. The Shimerdas had been conned into buying their place. They lived in a dingy, dirt floor cave and were very poor. Antonia’s father felt that he couldn’t deal with the strains of his new life and support his family so he committed suicide. Antonia struggles for survival along with her family. She works on the fields like a man and does not care about Jim’s suggestions that it will make her like a man:

“Oh, better, I like to work out of doors than in a house.” She used to sing joyfully. “I not care that your grandmother says it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man.” My Antonia (157).

She is forced to do the work of a man and turns from a gentle young lady into a man, in some ways. The elements of fun in her childhood were few and far in between. Antonia’s life is full of disappointment and she is forced to grow up much too quickly. Her awareness about the hardships of life is clear when she answers Jim in one of his questions as:

“If I live here like you that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us.” My Antonia (145).
The road she takes is full of ditches and bends but it clears and straightens in the end. As soon as her father is buried, Antonia realizes that she now has a heavy burden on her shoulders. Since she is one of the eldest in the family, she must now work to put food on their table. With the help of their neighbours, the Burdens, Antonia is able to establish a meager living for her family. She does this by working on her farm as well as the other farms in the area. While this work is very beneficial for the family, Antonia turns into a rough and wild creature. As Emmaline Burden, Jim’s grandmother indicates to Jim—

“Heavy field work’ll spoil that girl. She will lose all her nice ways and get rough ones”. My Antonia (143)

When she is old enough, Antonia leaves the prairies and goes in to town to find work. She becomes what we would call today, a live-in housekeeper. She works hard and sends all of her wages home to help her mother and siblings on the farm. Antonia and her friends create a quite reputation for themselves. Years later, Antonia is found in Hastings, Nebraska, married and with eleven children. Her dream has come true, to have land of her own and many delightful little children running wild all over the place. She works hard and is weary but has been repaid as her wish has been fulfilled. She has her land, her family, her garden and she still has the fire of life within her. After the rigors of bearing eleven children and running a farm, she is still vital and stalwart, brown-skinned and hardened, with no flabbiness. Her emotional strength is as great as a child. She survives the dislocation of immigration and the appalling suicide of the dignified father whom she dearly loved. Broken promises of marriage, an illegitimate child, and social ostracism are difficult realities for her, not elements of a cheap melodrama, but she only resolves to make a good life for herself and her child. The burdens that she had to carry were not meant for her shoulders. All through her life’s difficulties she remained devoted to whatever family she had. Thoughts of her family always came before thoughts of herself.

For perhaps measures of wealth, career, beauty and love fall short when held next to Antonia. If one could categorize life by that unnamable light or spirit which Antonia never loses, she would surpass all who belittle her achievements in other areas. Instance, life may be hard but it’s the hard times that make us stronger. It is a wonderful story of a strong woman who builds a great life out of a bad situation. Along with Antonia other female characters of the novel shares the same spirit of the protagonist.

Norwegian immigrant, Lena Lingard a small farm girl from a poverty-stricken family. She had one thing on her mind: money. She wanted freedom from worry about where her next meal would come from, or how she would pay for a new dress. Lena began her journey to wealth by becoming one of the many hired girls in the town of Black Hawk. She works for Mrs. Thomas the dressmaker in Black Hawk. She soon began making money with her new found talent, and used
this money in helping her poor mother. She is always busy in knitting stockings for little brothers and sisters, and even the Norwegian woman who disapproved of her, admitted that she is a good daughter of her mother. She enjoys her life even in bad times of her. In Lincoln develops intimacy with Jim and informs him about Antonia’s conditions.

Cather conjures Lena to contrast sharply with Antonia: while Antonia possesses an independence that gives her quiet inner strength, Lena craves excitement and autonomy, refusing to marry any of the men who fall in love with her beauty and charisma. Her choice to live in San Francisco is nearly as extreme for someone from Black Hawk as Jim’s decision to move to New York. It is no coincidence that Lena becomes important to Jim’s life at the moment he begins to transition out of childhood and into adulthood. Lena is a sexual figure in this novel.

Jim remarks on Lena’s sleepy eyes, her attractive features and figure and her seductive charms. Just as Antonia comes to embody Jim’s memories of childhood innocence and purity, Lena, with her desire for sophistication and her precocious sexuality, comes to represent Jim’s emergence as a young adult. Lena aspires to earn money, success, and independence. She is sophisticated, fashionable and she becomes a successful dressmaker in Lincoln. Lena later moves to San Francisco with Tiny Soderball.

Tiny Soderball is one of the hired girls in Black Hawk and a friend to Antonia and Lena. She worked hard while she lived in Black Hawk. She started her working career at the Boy’s Home hotel in Black Hawk. When she struck out on her own she went to Seattle and built a lodging-house in Seattle and during the time that she was running it she heard many a story about miners coming down from the northern territories with the stories of striking it rich. She decided to go for the glory. She sold her business and set out for the Alaskan territory, but without a little bit of help. She went in the company of a carpenter and his wife whom she had persuaded to go along with her.

The day she arrived she heard a tale from a man claiming that there had been a rich gold strike farther up river and with that she and her companions and around fifteen hundred people set out as well. But unfortunately within a few weeks she along with the droves of other people was out of work. Tiny and the carpenter’s wife began to cook for them in a tent. The miners gave her a building lot, and the carpenter put a log hotel for her. This not only initiated her business savvy but helped her become extraordinarily wealthy. After about ten years of being a hard core business woman she lost interest in much of what she held dear for the majority of her life up to that point. She said frankly that nothing interested her much now but making money. Not much may have gotten her excited any more but she was still a good person at heart. She is just the same as she always was. She is careless, but she is level-headed.

Another important character in this series is Frances Harling, the daughter of Mrs. Harling in whose house Antonia works as a housemaid. Mrs. Harling is the
matriarch of the Harling family and a charismatic active woman. Her daughter Frances shares her quality of becoming independent in every segment of life. She is the oldest of the Harling children. She has all the information about people around her town and has a very sound business mind. She has her father’s business acumen and manages her father’s accounts with a concern for others and philanthropy which her father lacks.

In this novel, Cather represented two different economical societies; one of the immigrants's which is portrayed by the hard working pioneer women like Antonia Shimerda, Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, a part of the earning strata willingly or unwillingly. This rural society of prairie farmlands competes with the other society of urban land which is represented by Frances Harling the modern New Woman.

References


