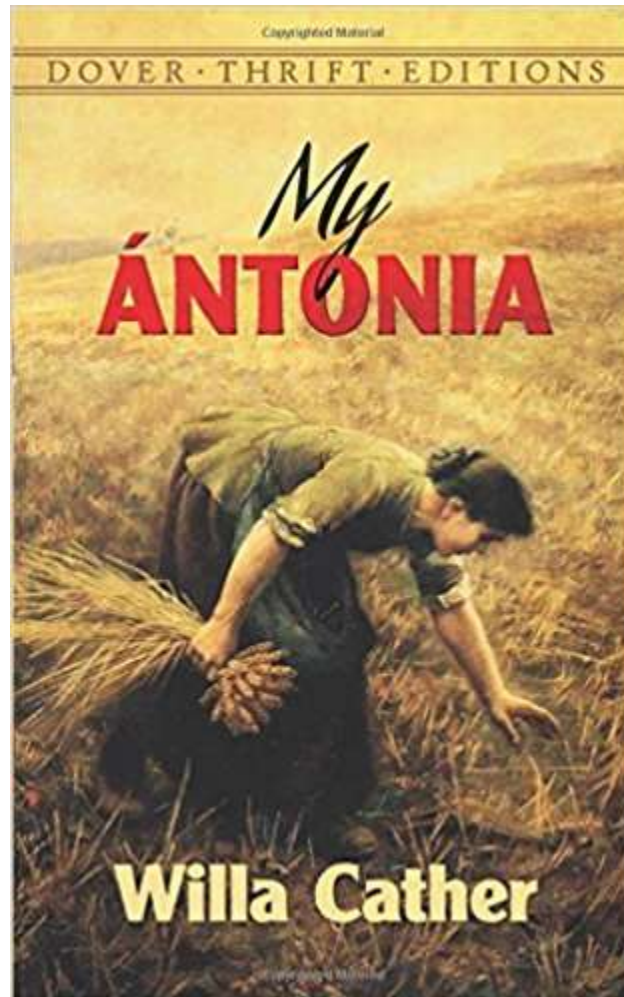


**Antonia Shimerda –
The True Pioneer with Reference to Willa Cather's *My Antonia***

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/My-%C3%81ntonia-Dover-Thrift-Editions/dp/0486282406>

Abstract

Around the globe, women undergo sufferings in one way or other. In fact, sufferings make women strong to face and tackle problems in life. While modern women approach difficulties in different ways, women of olden days struggled hard to get out of problems as they were in the chains of standards set by the society. On the other hand, the case of frontier women was even worse, as they had to face sufferings in their primitive living condition. Willa Cather, an early

twentieth century novelist portrays the struggle of Antonia Shimerda – an immigrant and a pioneer through her novel “My Antonia”. This paper analyses the pioneer virtues of Antonia Shimerda – the heroine of the novel who emerges as a strong woman despite her difficulties.

Keywords: Immigrant, Pioneer, Frontier, Resilience, Self-reliance.

Introduction

Willa Cather, an early twentieth century novelist, adopts an interesting method to portray the sufferings of a frontier woman through the eyes of the male character, Jim Burden only to show how men expect women to remain within the standards set by them. On this approach, critic Jan Goggans comments that it is a “conservative social attempt to ‘tell the story’ of how women and minorities should behave in the new world” (157).

Qualities of the Pioneers

Cather, in her portrayal of Antonia as a strong woman, wants to extol the virtues of the pioneer women, who possess “Individualism, Innovativeness, Openness to new experience, Mobility, Self-reliance, Trust in quick working relationships, Personal openness, Sincerity, Sense of effectiveness, Belief in the purity and values of rural areas” (Turner). In general, when women possess any of these qualities, they can certainly come out of troubles.

Attitude of Father and Brother

The struggle of the pioneer woman starts when her family migrates to the Midwest in search of a better life. Unable to tame the barren land and face rough weather, Antonia’s father Shimerda commits suicide. This incident becomes a prelude to Antonia’s sufferings. Ambrosch, Antonia’s brother ignores the desire of his father to make Antonia educated and well mannered. He utilizes the strength of Antonia and “hired his sister out like a man and she went from farm to farm, binding sheaves or working with the thrashers” (My Antonia 70). Here Cather juxtaposes the attitude of a father and brother towards the daughter and the sister respectively.

Openness to New Experience

Antonia as a true pioneer transforms herself willingly whenever the occasion demands taking over new roles. While children of her age play in the fields, Antonia works in the fields. She understands the need to work, accepts responsibilities confidently and shows interest in learning farm work. She believes that her hard work will change the status of their family. Like a pioneer, she is open to new experience and tells her friend Jim, “I like to be like a man” (My Antonia 67). Critic Jan Goggans feels that Antonia’s “notion of being ‘like a man’, is for Antonia, the notion of being meaningful in the world” (163). In fact, Cather projects her teenage practice of adopting a male persona “to find a way to express the human possibilities her society divided between male and female” (O Brien 101).

Perspectives of Women towards Suffering Women

While men try to harass women, women try to rescue their kind from wretchedness. Jim’s grandmother sets Antonia free from the brutality of Ambrosch – the selfish man who lives comfortably on the hard earnings of his sister and never gives money for Antonia’s basic needs. When Jim’s grandmother takes efforts to make Antonia happy, Mrs. Harling – a landlady, teaches

her English, housekeeping, and other fine qualities needed for women. Her association with Mrs. Harling helps Antonia do her future role as a mother very effectively. Besides, in this stage she gets independence, saves her earnings and starts spending it for her needs. Through these two women characters, Cather projects her view that women can protect women from further sufferings.

Plight of Immigrant Women

Immigrant women face exploitation at every quarter of their lives. Even native women do not understand the plight of immigrant women. Cather introduces the chapter “The Hired Girls” to show the double standards practiced in those days. While the immigrant girls work hard “to earn a living, to help the father struggle out of debt, or to make it possible for the younger children of the family to go to school” (My Antonia 92), the Black Hawk men try to exploit these girls. The wives of these men curse the immigrant girls and consider them “a menace to the social order” (92) rather than blaming their husbands.

While the immigrant girls dance and earn money to help their family, Antonia tries to satisfy her aesthetic sense through dance, and the native men trouble her. She is exposed to shame when Mr. Harry Paine, who is about to get married, forcefully holds and kisses Antonia in front of others. In addition, men jump over the compound wall of Mr. Harling to see Antonia, which makes him restrict Antonia’s movement. This incident makes Antonia understand the fact that women are prone to sexual harassment especially when they try to satisfy their aesthetic sense.

Antonia’s Self-reliance

Unable to stay indoors, Antonia leaves the house of Mr. Harling and starts working for Wick Cutter – a greedy money lender who has the reputation of seducing girls. Antonia’s self-reliance makes her underestimate the attitude of wicked men. Though she gets into the trap of Wick Cutter, Antonia escapes sexual assault with the help of her childhood friend Jim. Yet, Jim fails to understand her struggle for survival, feels that Antonia leads a disgraceful life and abandons her. Jim’s approach indicates that men fail to understand women.

Matches Made by Women

Generally, it is believed that marriage offers safety and due respect to women. On the contrary, men use this sacred bond to deceive women. As women are gullible, matches made by women turns out to be unsuccessful quite often. The same is the case with widow Steavens, who makes a mismatch between Antonia and a bus conductor, Larry Donovan. Ironically, Mrs. Steavens’ attempts to save Antonia from the wrath of men lead Antonia to further sufferings. Larry, who cheats married and unmarried women deceives Antonia, takes her to Denver under the false hope of marrying her, sexually exploits her and abandons her when her money exhausts. This mismatch makes Antonia undergo mental harassment.

Strength of the Pioneer Woman

Adversities make Antonia a stronger woman. The femininity in Antonia makes her gain strength to deliver her illegal child. In this part of life, Antonia becomes a true pioneer, carries the baby in her womb, works hard on the fields, breaks the conventional role of a woman, wears “a man’s long overcoat” and works hardy on the fields. She learns the nuances of farm work, takes

care of farm animals, tames the barren land, and ultimately shows productivity. Her dedication to the land makes her deliver the baby only “after getting cattle home”. People who once gossiped about her, start wondering at her ability and reliability. Cather has used this particular episode to project her view that women should be given opportunities to exhibit their talents and the patriarchal society must stop keeping them within the set standards.

Married life vs. Farm Life

Antonia’s status as a mother and her equality with men on various aspects make her think about her future. She looks for a good companion and when she comes across Anton Cuzak, an urban Bohemian – a man with good qualities, she marries him. She understands the responsibilities of a wife and a mother. She makes a perfect balance between the roles, never allows monotony to creep in. Antonia learns from her past experience and establishes marital harmony. Naturally, the couple share mutual understanding and respect for each other. In Cather’s words, Antonia “was the impulse and he the corrective” (My Antonia 159). Antonia balances her married and farm life perfectly that within ten years of hard work, the couple become the proud owners of a beautiful farm and orchard.

Antonia as the Earth Mother

The last phase of Antonia’s life is beautiful. Her mental, physical and sexual harassment end with her companionship with Anton Cuzak. Thanks to the possession of openness to ideas and the attitude to love people, give life to the people, farm and animals. She teaches farm work to her dozen children and makes them get good behavior. Her role as the earth mother gives life to the barren land and the land responds abundantly in the form of its yields. Through the chain of struggles in Antonia’s life, Cather explains her view that when women face difficulties with courage, they can excel in their chosen fields.

Jim’s Respect to Antonia

Jim, who once abandoned Antonia, gets fascinated by her calm life with Anton Cuzak and their dozen children. Further, Jim understands the value of Antonia, when Cuzak says, “At first, I near go crazy with lonesomeness... but my woman is got such a warm heart. She always makes it as good for me as she could” (My Antonia 162). Jim realizes the emptiness in his life and looks at her as “the apotheosis of the pioneer woman” (Helmick 176) with respect.

Summation

As an immigrant, Antonia comes across hardships in life, yet she gets a unique status in life only because of her devotion and dedication to the land. Cather uses the character Antonia to show how immigrant women played a vital role in the development and construction of an American nation. Besides, Indian readers can identify the qualities of Lord Ardhanareeshvara “the lord who is half-woman” (Goldberg 1) present in Antonia as she exhibits masculine qualities in her field work and feminine qualities in her care and concern to the land as well as her family. Indeed, Antonia Shimerda emerges as a true pioneer due to her spirit of survival, adaptability and resilience.

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