

Abstract

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is nowadays regarded as one of the most important U.S. writers, and the volume of critical works, articles and dissertations devoted to her as a person and an artist is immense. One of the problematic relationship has always been, as can be seen from a number of critical essays and books, between Cather and U.S. feminists. The feminists would have liked to include Cather, as an feminist writer, into their group of the first-rate, woman-authored “female canon”, however, such intent brought about an important question. Is it possible to regard Willa Cather as a feminist, considering her attacks on other women-writers, and her negative attitude towards the organized women's rights movement?

This work's objective is to explore the background of Cather and organized women's rights movement's bizarre relationship, and answer the question above. To find out if Cather's work with its strong heroines empowered or weakened women in general, her novels and stories, rather than facts and assumption about her personal life, are used. The relevant parts of the plots from Cather's fiction are put into the historical perspective of the contemporary U.S. laws, showing that although Cather created exceptional woman characters, she let them deal with the same conditions and problems other women (that is the “common” women) encountered.

To ensure variety of women characters and their stories, five works of Willa Cather and ten of her heroines were chosen to be analyzed: Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!*, Antonia Shimerda, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball and Frances Harling in *My Antonia*, Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*, Myra Henshaw in *My Mortal Enemy* and Victoria Templeton and Mrs. Harris in *Old Mrs. Harris*.

In order to put Cather's heroines' life stories and their relationships into the bigger picture perspective, the backbone of the strictly genderly divided U.S. patriarchal society, The English Common Law and its implications is described. Basic information about the women's emancipation movement as a mass response to the woman's inferior, second-class-citizen position is supplied as well. Then the problematic social issues which were influenced by or based on U.S. legislature, such

as marriage, work, property and possible divorce are connected with specific examples from Cather's fiction. Using Cather's heroines and also the real, nineteenth-century-women personal stories, as found in State Historical Society of Iowa and Iowa Women's Archives in Iowa City reveals, in which ways were women abridged in their constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

To be able to challenge the women's disadvantaged status and their missing social and political rights, women united. Their agenda, as put together by leaders of the 1848 Seneca Falls Woman's Rights convention which marks the beginning of the women's rights movement, is described. Some of the new laws that improved women's status, for example The Married Women Property Act (1848 and on), together with the new laws which confirmed women's second-class citizen position, such as the 1907 Citizenship Act, are also discussed.

The concluding part draws attention to the fact that the unfair patriarchal practices and various cases of injustice challenged by feminists were very accurately depicted in plots and subplots of Cather's fiction. The power of an artistic portrayal can often bring out emotions, reactions and needed changes more distinctly than the mere political speeches or proclamations. Although Cather was not politically active in organized women's rights movement, her fiction should be regarded as political. The various portrayals of the gender inequality in the patriarchal society which Cather deliberately created in her writing, confirm her significance for the "cause of all women". If we agree with the statement that the first step to freedom is one's realization of their subordination, then Cather's fiction, containing strong heroines and read by many common women, could not weaken these women but only empower them.