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## ”Willa Cather – Fictions of Gender in My *Ántonia*” Emmeline Gros

► **To cite this version:**

Emmeline Gros. ”Willa Cather – Fictions of Gender in My *Ántonia*”. “Willa Cather, My *Antonia*.” Agrégation Anglais. Ed. Gérald Preher. Paris : Ellipses (2016): 173-90. , 2016. hal-01816147

**HAL Id: hal-01816147**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01816147>**

Submitted on 14 Jun 2018

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## Abstract

While recognized for her truthful rendering of life in the West, Cather did not choose to write her memories directly, even less to write an autobiography or to publish a diary. She did not account for her lived experience through her own voice or through a female voice for that matter. Quite the contrary. Cather turned to a male narrative point of view and it is through Jim Burden (and his memories) that *Ántonia Shimerda* is given life.

Surrendering one's voice and welcoming Jim's instead may raise a number of questions. Like Phyllis Rose, readers could justly ponder whether "*My Ántonia* ... [would] have been better [book] if [it] had been told from the point of view of women instead of men?" It might be easy to solve this riddle with a simple "[p]erhaps, but then [it] would not have been the [book] we know" (A.15).

Added to this difficulty (and keeping in mind that *Ántonia Shimerda* originates from Jim's memories), personal memory, as Eric Hobsbawn has shown, is always "a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts" (206). As historians have explained, "memory cannot be independent of cultural influences, but is shaped or even constructed by them" (Summerfield 67). Starting from this premise, readers of *My Ántonia* should not only wonder if the novel would have been a better book if narrated from a woman's perspective, but rather (and most interestingly) how gender and the norms that specifically shaped Cather's society intersect with the process of creation and how these 'influences' inform (or alter) Jim Burden's narrative point of view.

## Willa Cather – Fictions of Gender in *My Ántonia* Emmeline GROS

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) undoubtedly is one of America's literary masterpieces. Critics have celebrated Cather's realism, her choice to truthfully depict "the foundational American story of immigration and pioneer renewal" (O'Brien *Emerging Voice* 472). *The New York Times Review* called the book "a carefully detailed picture rather than a story" and other reviewers praising Cather for her "extraordinary reality," admiring her for surrendering "the usual methods of fiction in telling a story" (qtd. in *Emerging Voice* 472).

These discussions are easily understandable, considering that Cather's realistic portrayal of pioneer life in the West derives from her own childhood memories—a childhood she spent amidst Nebraska pastures—and judging from the fact that the characters of her western prairie novels like *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918) are inspired by her own memories of immigrant farmers. *Ántonia*, for example, is based on Cather's bohemian neighbor Annie Sadilek (Prchal 3).

Cather recognized the importance of the immigrant population, recalling in an interview the impulse that took her to writing. She stated:

When I was about nine, [...] father took me from our place near Winchester, Virginia, to a ranch in Nebraska. Few of our neighbors were Americans--most of them were Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Bohemians. I grew fond of some of these immigrants--particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home country. I used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was with me, the initial impulse. I didn't know any writing people. I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition. (*Cather in Person* 20)

While recognized for her truthful rendering of life in the West, Cather did not choose to write her memories directly, even less to write an autobiography or to publish a diary. She did not account for her lived experience through her own voice or through a female voice for that matter. Quite the contrary. Cather turned to a male narrative point of view and it is through Jim Burden (and his memories) that *Ántonia*

Shimerda is given life. At the beginning of *My Ántonia*, we witness an unnamed female narrator fusing her own memories of Ántonia with Jim's:

I told him I had always felt that other people—he himself, for one—knew her much better than I. I was ready, however, to make an agreement with him; I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her...My own story was never written of her, but the following narrative is Jim's manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me. (MÀ 7)

Undoubtedly, surrendering one's voice and welcoming Jim's instead may raise a number of questions. Like Phyllis Rose, readers could justly ponder whether "*My Ántonia* ... [would] have been better [book] if [it] had been told from the point of view of women instead of men?" It might be easy to solve this riddle with a simple "[p]erhaps, but then [it] would not have been the [book] we know" (A.15).

Amanda Craig, however, judges that gender bending—or having a female writer resort to a male narrator—may have now become increasingly fashionable especially for male authors, yet writing from the perspective of the other sex remains a particularly uneasy task for women writers ("Writing as Another Sex"). This is so, not only because "men seem to make it their life's work to obscure what they're thinking and feeling," but also because:

Women writing as men [...] are just a bit too aware of particularities that heterosexual men fail to pick up on. Apart from Sherlock Holmes, no man created by a man ever notices how somebody is dressed: male characters by women always do. They notice smells and tastes, whereas men in books by men are apparently all suffering from heavy colds.

Added to this difficulty (and keeping in mind that Ántonia Shimerda originates from Jim's memories), personal memory, as Eric Hobsbawn has shown, is always "a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts" (206). As historians have explained, "memory cannot be independent of cultural influences, but is shaped or even constructed by them" (Summerfield 67). Starting from this premise, readers of *My Ántonia* should not only wonder if the novel would have been a better book if narrated from a woman's perspective, but rather (and most

interestingly) how gender and the norms that specifically shaped Cather's society intersect with the process of creation and how these 'influences' inform (or alter) Jim Burden's narrative point of view.

### **Gender in Willa Cather's America**

The locale chosen by Cather (the great plains of the Midwest) is in itself a heavily-gendered space, one where male and female roles are clearly defined. The Midwest, the Far West, the Frontier have all engendered some of America's most powerful icons of masculinity: the farmer, the cowboy, the cattle-driver, the horseman of the plains, to use Owen Wister's formulation, icons that have often eclipsed attention to their female companions in these open spaces. In most westerns or fictions featuring these icons, the "heroes are male characters who exhibit strong masculine traits such as a reliance on action in place of verbal communication, a lack of demonstrated feelings, and an attitude of dominance toward women" (Timko 3). Jennifer Bailey explains that:

women's role in the migration westwards was [...] often secondary and reactive. Many were forced against their will to follow their husbands or look for jobs as housekeepers in the West and leave their family and friends behind. [. . .] Some were overcome by the strangeness and hardship of the Western environment and the moral and domestic responsibility that attended this way of life [...] Some went mad. (393)

If Willa Cather was influenced by the landscapes that she experienced during her childhood, she was also very much affected by the social and historical context in which she grew up. Cather was born in 1873 during the Gilded Age of America, an age which "rigidly defined male and female roles and encouraged members of society to work within those conventions" (Everton 18). This period also contributed to reinforcing the female versus male-coded spaces that the Great Plains, like the western environment, embodied. It was the time of the "separate spheres" doctrine, a time "encouraging men to be concerned about their character," to value "self-control, honor, loyalty, independence, self-sufficiency, and a sense of duty and integrity" (Hoffert 334, qtd. in Everton 12).

In the popular magazines of the period (in the *Ladies Companion* of 1860 for instance), one could read that "a really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority, and therefore is grateful for support" (Sanford 15, qtd. in

Welter 159). Men also were prescribed specific traits (aggressiveness, self-assertion, motivation, determination, etc.) that “they needed to possess, and the quality of their maleness was defined by how well they performed within their prescribed gender roles” (Everton 4).<sup>8</sup>

### **Questioning Gender Norms – The New Woman**

Gender norms and models however rarely go unquestioned. At the same time that manuals advocated the ideal of true womanhood and at the same time that “success” manuals advocated a strong, muscular, protective and virile model of “ideal” manhood, a “New Woman” emerged within Cather’s society. This “New Woman,” who can be defined as “single, well-educated, independent, self-sufficient, and strong-willed” (Hoffert 283, qtd. in Everton 12), proclaimed her right for education, employment, and the vote (which ultimately was passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920, with the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution).

This “New Woman” contaminated female literary versions of land settlement. These versions tended to move away from the idealized version of the feminine role as the ‘Angel in the House’ ideal of Victorian homes. As Bailey notes, in female literary versions of land settlement, “it is apparent that this kind of [female] experience develops into serious and significant questioning of a familiar literary tradition based on a masculine ethos” (394). As a matter of fact, most female writers from the 1920s (like Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and Willa Cather) “undermine the metaphor of the garden as the apotheosis of moral and social order in the civilized settlement. [... they] reject the notion that the garden of the civilized settlement, with its moral and social order, is personified by the ideal feminine woman” (Bailey 394).

The consequences for men were inevitably dramatic: Hoffert explains that “[a]djustments in gender roles and relations began to emerge. In the end, independence, courage, and activity were still considered to be quintessential manly virtues, and work was still central to man’s identity, but by 1920 men did not have exclusive claim to those attributes and activities” (297, qtd. in Everton 14). The 1890s had marked the close of Frontier with Frederick Jackson Turner boldly asserting on July 12, 1893 that the western frontier was now closed.

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<sup>8</sup> In her dissertation, Everton devotes several paragraphs to the rigid gender ideals in the Gilded Age, looking at the manly virtues that men needed to display in order to achieve real manhood (3-10).

Now, as the separate spheres doctrine waned<sup>12</sup>, the assertion of manliness had heavy ideological import, and many men, Silber explains, thus “hoped to capture a sense of masculine authority [...] they tried to resurrect a sense of sexual order, which was assumed to be natural and immutable, as a way to counteract what seemed to be a decaying social hierarchy and their own loss of control” (167).<sup>15</sup>

### **Willa Cather and Gender**

Cather felt these social and cultural transformations as a reality. As Everton explains, Cather is a paradox, a contradictory figure:

She has been labeled by some scholars as the “Midwestern Mother” whose novels celebrate the heart and soul of Nebraska. She has also been labeled a feminist, a lesbian, and even an anti-feminist. She is also seen by some scholars as modern, but old-fashioned by others. This ambivalence with regards to her identity lies at the core of the life of Willa Cather. She defies being labeled and packaged because she sought throughout her whole life for sole authorship over her identity. (18)

Cather also enjoyed appropriating a male identity. E. K. Brown notes how,

In her high-school days she wore her hair shingled, shorter than many of the boys. Her clothes and hats were also boyish: a starched shirt, a tie, and a hat almost like a boy’s. She did not care to be called Willa; many of her friends used Willie, but to this she preferred Will or Bill; and it gave her a particular satisfaction when a perceptive, appreciative person would call her Dr. Will. (48).

If Cather’s tint at cross-dressing obviously pointed to her desire for troubling gender norms (using Butler’s own words here) and for self-

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<sup>12</sup> The 1890s saw the founding of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and the birth of female-led Progressive Era reform movements.

<sup>15</sup> Roosevelt, in particular, stressed his ideal of the ‘strenuous life’ as a solution to the pervasive ‘sissiness’ that threatened the vitality and future of the nation. On this subject, one could read: *1920: The Year That Made the Decade Roar*. (New York: Pegasus, 2015).

definition,<sup>17</sup> numerous critics have also considered Cather's gender-fluid identity as a sign of the author's "lesbian desires" (Everton 18).

While evidence of Cather's lesbianism has been discussed at length,<sup>18</sup> Cather remained very private about it and never called herself a lesbian. Problematically so, Cather publicly denied that gender was psychologically powerful or culturally meaningful. As a young magazine columnist in the 1980s, for example, she boasted to readers of the *Pittsburg Home Monthly* that "the fact that I was a girl never damaged my ambition to be a pope or an emperor" (*WP* 1:337, qtd. in Lindemann *Queering America* 86) and, using the pseudonym Helen Delay, she urged parents in selecting books for their children to avoid making the "hateful distinction" between boys' books and girls' books for as long as possible (*WP* 1:368, qtd. in Lindemann *Queering America* 86). A strong feminist, she often claimed that being "a girl never damaged [her] ambitions to be a pope or an emperor" (*WP* 1:368).

And it did not: Cather who figured on the list of Pittsburgh's "Pioneers in Women's Progress" (qtd. in *Cather in Person* 3), became an award-winning novelist, one of the "great American writers" (to use critic H.L. Menken's expression), and she did so by distancing herself from other "female" writers. She often wondered "why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, [for] they usually make such an infernal mess of it" (*Kingdom of Art* 408) and attacked her fellow women writers with such vehemence "that critics have recently wondered if the concept of 'female misogyny' might not apply to her" ("It Ain't My Prairie" 117).

### **The Choice of a Male Narrator in *My Ántonia***

Taking into consideration Cather's rejection of gender conventions and the writer's view on her own sex and/in fiction, it seems hardly surprising, therefore, that she should have chosen to play with gender and to pick a male narrator for *My Ántonia*. Phyllis Rose recognized that "[w]hen she became a novelist, Cather [...] memorably adopted a male point of view," to the point that Phyllis Rose argued that "Cather's biography should have been named 'Williams: The Life of Willa Cather'" (qtd. in Lee 38). More surprising maybe, however, is the

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on Cather's masculine persona, refer to Jan Goggans's "Social (Re)Visioning in the Fields of *My Ántonia*".

<sup>18</sup> Theories regarding Cather's lesbianism are based on her strong and intimate relationships with other women (among whom, Louise Pond, Isabelle McClung, or Edith Lewis, Cather's companion for most of her adult life). Read Janis Stout, *A Calendar of Letters of Willa Cather*.



overwhelming importance accorded to this masculine presence which, some critics have argued, forces itself through/into the text at the expense of women. Deborah Lambert regrets that with *My Ántonia*, Cather has “stopped portraying strong and successful women and began to depict patriarchal institutions and predominantly male characters” after *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. She asserts that *My Ántonia* [i]s Cather’s transitional novel (Lambert 680).

The choice of a male narrator may be explained by different but interrelated factors. Lambert explains Cather’s choice, arguing that Jim Burden, both narrator and protagonist of the novel, embodies a fictional version of Cather herself, “in some sort an incarnation of the author” (Sergeant, qtd. in Hoover 73). If indeed, Jim Burden is here to “speak from [Cather’s] own sexual identity and express her own emotions for women” (Lee 153), understandably then, this cover-up might be seen as a continuation of the masquerade that Cather had started when she was a teenager. O’Brien reminds us that Cather’s “lovers remained heterosexual, her narrators—enraptured by sensual and maternal women—male” (“The Thing Not Named” 94).

Other critics, distancing themselves from this narrator-as-a-mask interpretation, have offered another explanation for Cather’s transition to a male narrative point of view, arguing that it may only be natural “to see the world, and women, from the dominant perspective, when that is what the world reflects and literature records” (Lambert 680). Read in this light and no matter how insecure, rebellious, or unconventional Cather may have been, her choice of a male narrator would but reflect that, as a woman, Cather “had to resort to male masks”, because she “never completely freed herself from male constructions of femininity” (O’Brien ‘The Thing Not Named’ 596).

Maybe then, one should find fault with an author who is “guilty of denying (her) womanhood” since she celebrates “male activity and institutions” in novels like *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Lambert 680, qtd. in “The Thing Not Named” 594). Lambert blames Cather for celebrating “one of the most familiar stereotypes at the end of the novel where Ántonia is portrayed as a poor but happy mother of eleven, a stereotype [...which] distorts and reduces the lives of women’s individual identity, and where motherhood and nurturing promises false fulfillment” (687, qtd. in Paulsson 3).

In light of the stereotyped gender roles at stake in *My Ántonia* and considering the prevalence of gender—or gender trouble, to be more exact—in Cather’s private life and in Cather’s times, the analysis of gender in the novel will thus address the following questions: does a male voice ultimately—as Lambert seems to suggest—reinscribe

gender roles within a “natural” or normative structure? Does Cather use of male narrators (and centers of consciousness) signify the writer’s blind acceptance of patriarchal values? When portrayed from a masculine perspective (or when these are seen, observed, and remembered through a male gaze), are women always forcefully restrained and considered as abstractions or objects only?

Certainly, and inherent to the construction of *My Ántonia* is the admission that the novel remains a man’s perspective, that of Jim Burden who possesses narrative, creative, but also linguistic authorities over the characters surrounding him: as the possessive ‘my’ suggests, we are getting a picture of “her” through Jim’s “My”. Seizing the pen is also clearly presented as a male-gendered activity, suggesting “not merely that women do not usually write but that women in the profoundest sense cannot write” (Kerrison 17). Because Cather’s “own story was never written” (MA 8) and because Ántonia is unable to write in English, Lindemann recognizes that “for Jim, the language of imaginative possession and the self-aggrandizing rhetorical gesture are part of his birthright as native-born American male endowed with a ‘romantic disposition’” (“It Ain’t My Prairie” 119).

Interestingly however, readers soon realize that, unlike the traditional narratives in which the hero (or central protagonist) is almost inevitably constructed as masculine whereas the objects and/or obstacles marking heroic quests are usually defined as female, Jim is found retreating to the back of the stage, while his wife, Ántonia, Lena Lingard, the Hired Girls take precedence. Evidence of this can be found in the opening pages of the introduction to *My Ántonia*: here, Cather proposes to introduce Jim Burden to her readers. Yet, the presentation of Jim “the obscure young lawyer, struggling to make his way in New York” (MA 5) is soon obscured by the presence of his wife, Geneviève Whitney (whose description occupies the remainder of the third paragraph in this page). In addition, and as Fisher-Wirth remarks, even though Jim seizes the pen, Jim “exists only as the (fictive) creator of this highly artful novel” (MA 42). She adds that Jim is no creator, but “belongs to the world of death”, since he is

childless, trapped in a sterile and unloving marriage” and because “apart from Ántonia, Jim has no story; of the twenty years that intervene between parts 4 and 5 of the novel-years during which he ages from twenty to forty, marrying, becoming a lawyer, settling in New York, he says not a word at all (MA 42).

For Lindemann, the narrative structure itself seems to “tilt the scale in favor of the women’s side in the battle for linguistic power” (“It Ain’t My Prairie” 117). One must remember that in *My Ántonia*, Jim’s story is first and foremost that of a woman (Cather) framing a man (Jim) writing a woman (Ántonia). As such, it is the feminine “which gets the first and last word and is presented as the authoritative speaker” (“It Ain’t My Prairie” 117).

Considering Jim’s propensity to lose control over his own narrative and considering the high probability of unwelcome (understand ‘women’s’) voices to erupt through the text,<sup>21</sup> it is only logical maybe that masculine authority maybe aligned with man’s desiring to reinforce or redraw strong gender binaries, thus confirming that manliness equals with man’s dominance over the women in Nebraska.

The snake episode in Chapter 4 of *My Ántonia* serves this purpose. In this episode, Jim finds himself facing, then killing a very large snake, and claiming “I was now a big fellow” (*MÀ* 33), thus accomplishing a rite of passage into manhood, one that is validated by his (female) supporter/admirer Ántonia.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Ántonia cannot afford the luxury of admiring men forever. As Everton explains, “[w]ith the death of her father, Ántonia is forced to work on the family farm for her family to survive, and this shift in her role sparks a change in her identity” (44), or at least in the way she is now perceived by Jim. Ántonia is portrayed wearing “the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her calves, over the boot-tops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s” (*MÀ* 70).

Clearly enough, when Ántonia can no longer live by the ideals of “true womanhood,” she is thrown into the world of the ‘grotesque’. Jim notices that she eats “so noisily now, like a man” (*MÀ* 70) and boasts “how much she could lift and endure” (*MÀ* 71). Throughout the episode, Ántonia is clearly defeminized, considered as an object of grotesque curiosity, a mixture of male/female characteristics. Jim notes: “I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered (*MÀ* 72).

The episode is particularly interesting since the emphasis is placed on Jim’s visual appreciation of Ántonia. As Emily Paulsson argues,

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<sup>21</sup> For the “critical female voices [...] that] periodically erupt out of Jim’s narrative,” refer to Lindemann, “It Ain’t My Prairie”.

<sup>22</sup> For a close analysis of gender roles in this episode, refer to Emelie Paulsson’s “The Limitations of Rigid Gender Norms in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*”.

“what behavior is considered appropriate and what is not for a young woman [is made obvious] through the eyes of the novel’s male narrator Jim” (5). That vision should complement memory as the sense through which Jim experiences the ‘new’ *Ántonia* is hardly surprising, since the gendered visual relations in *My Ántonia* certainly invoke Mulvey’s influential paper on phallogentrism and visual representation which contends that women are typically the objects, rather than the possessors, of gaze. Vision—as Peter Brooks explains—is a “typically male prerogative” whose object of fascination is the “woman’s body” (88).<sup>23</sup> It is also the sense best adapted to express this type of dehumanization” since “vision works at a distance and need not be reciprocal, it provides a great deal of easily categorized information, it enables the perceiver accurately to locate (pin down) the object” (Scheman 173).

What is at stake here is Jim’s delusion—forced by *Ántonia*’s subversion of what he feels is feminine propriety and by her stepping outside of set gender boundaries. What is even worse for Jim is the fact that *Ántonia* takes great pride in this literally made-up masculinity: she says: “Jim, you ask Jake how much he ploughed to-day. I don’t want that Jake get more done in one day than me. I want we have very much corn this fall” (*MÀ* 61). *Ántonia* also brags: “I can work like a man now” (*MÀ* 61).

Understandably and considering that vision is indeed a male prerogative, the mixing of female and male identity promoted by *Ántonia*’s “I” in the above examples forces Jim’s “eye” to reconsider the limitations imposed by gender and by a patriarchal order demanding that women be both contributing to the farm-work and confined to the domestic sphere of the kitchen, the drawing-room. Most importantly, in this ‘I’ to ‘eye’ encounter, “*Ántonia*’s identity” becomes a site/sight of anxiety. “My” *Ántonia* escapes Jim’s possession since *Ántonia*’s identity, to use Helvie’s expression here, is no longer “explainable in terms of [the] traditional categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ ‘male’ and ‘female’”. The reward of gender bending is obvious: the “binary categories begin to collapse” (Helvie 36, qtd. in Rabin 31).

In *My Ántonia*, anxiety about the masquerade of femininity or the female ‘grotesque’ body is clearly manifested in Jim’s description of another woman, Lena Lingard (*MÀ* 121-123). Lena is grotesque, because she is overtly sexual, escaping (or overflowing) it seems, in the sensual power she exerts over her “gazers” (and over their dreams), the

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<sup>23</sup> John Berger (1973) even extends this observation (formerly used to criticize Hollywood movies) in culture at large, saying that “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47).

very “gaze” that attempts (or is supposed) to frame her. If Jim rejects *Ántonia*’s androgeny (her liminality as neither man nor woman) by turning her into an abnormality (she is a woman who “yawned often ... and kept stretching her arms over her head” (*MÀ* 70)), Jim equally rejects Lena’s femininity by turning it into another abnormality. Everton reads here Jim’s “fear of women,” arguing that “there is an undercurrent of apprehension found in the dream” since, in Jim’s dream/nightmare, Lena is “coming toward him holding a reaping hook, a tool usually associated with death” (*MÀ* 41).

Certainly, Lena’s performance of womanhood in these scenes is another masquerade—that of excessive femininity—one however that is utterly independent of the prevailing sexual or marital economy of 19<sup>th</sup> Century culture. Surprisingly so, Lena’s tempting sensuality in her short skirt does not aim at securing a husband. What Lena really wants is to secure her independence and female agency (*MÀ* 156).

The idea of womanliness as masquerade is nothing new. As a matter of fact, the explicit positioning of masquerade as a typically-feminine prerogative supports the view defended by Joan Rivière or Luce Irigaray which “has been repeatedly deployed for its potential to deconstruct an essential notion of femininity and characterize it as a masquerade in a phallic economy of desire that may or may not hide a repressed but potentially destabilizing female erotics” (Walton 17).

Nevertheless, Lena’s masquerade, like *Ántonia*’s, is problematic. For Luce Irigaray:

masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything. But they are there as objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy. (133-4)

In this scene, Lena is obviously both object of sexual enjoyment and subject of enjoyment, asserting that she will kiss Jim as much as she wants. Once again, binaries begin to collapse, with Lena leaving Jim to be “drifting [since she] had broken up [his] serious mood” (*MÀ* 155).

In a similar vein, Mary Ann Doane explains that “masquerade is not theorized by Rivière as joyful or affirmative play but as an anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture, as a position which is potentially disturbing, uncomfortable [...] as well as psychically painful for the woman” (47). Undoubtedly, both Lena and *Ántonia*’s self-

transformations do not serve to refocus the male gaze upon a consciously constructed image of femininity instead of the real self (Craft 830). *Ántonia's* self-admiring posture, as she asks Jim “to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm” (MÀ 78) or Lena’s enjoyment at seizing—and not refocusing—the (male) gaze when “look[ing] sleepily and confidently at one from under her long lashes” (MÀ 91) clearly point to the subversive potential of feminist aesthetics.

*Ántonia*, for sure, is not catering to Jim’s fantasies. Unfortunately, however, “some of the most memorable images in the novel are those of *Ántonia* showing her willingness and eagerness to work hard in the fields while wearing a man’s clothes and shoes” (Kinnison 205-206, qtd. in Paulsson 4). Consequently, the most memorable image, we understand, is not that which is kept in Jim’s memory as an “ideal” (or as a child), but rather the very concrete and diminishing image of *Ántonia* who is forced to assume a man’s role in the fields. Such images would thus seem to facilitate an understanding of the woman’s status—as seen through Jim’s memories—as spectacle rather than spectator, as passive rather than object, as object rather than subject. Yet, *My Ántonia* is also, and probably most importantly, the story of a woman stripped of spectacle, of a woman who not only steps out of gender conventions but also regains her “looks” in the eyes of Jim and, to some extent, in her own eyes.

As Claudia Johnson sees it, “women [traditionally] rarely look,” because she explains, “[u]sually they are too insane—like Sterne’s mad Maria or Burney’s idiot woman—to return a lucid gaze; too ashamed—like Goldsmith’s Olivia—to meet a looker’s eyes; or too delirious—like Marianne Dashwood (in Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*) to care” (169). If such is the case, *My Ántonia* constructs and considers gendered visual relations that complicate the (traditional) female/passive gaze. At stake in the reunion with *Ántonia* in book V “Cuzak’s Boys” is the attempt to ‘freeze’ *Ántonia* into an ideal. Jim explains: “I did not want to find her aged and broken: I really dreaded it” (MÀ 173).

Despite the logic of Jim’s argument, however, *Ántonia*, we can argue, writes herself out of objectification. In effect, life in the plains and on the farm disavows *Ántonia's* position as a visually available object by supplying a pragmatic and decidedly non-erotic reason for her visibility. In this final meeting, *Ántonia* “came in and stood before [him]; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled” (MÀ 175). *Ántonia*, this time, becomes visible in the text as a battered woman having lived “as much and as hard” (MÀ 175). In this instance, she becomes visible, we might say, because her body is aged and exhausted, not for the purpose of display (Bode 190). Thus,

while the view of *Ántonia* in terms of her “flat-chested, curly brown hair” features dehumanizes her, the anxiety around looking at *Ántonia* again is quickly resolved through the mention of a specific historical context that, we could say, mitigates her visibility and her position as object of an all-powerful male gaze. The narrator not only stops objectifying her, but also invokes pathos and the end of the novel portrays what we could call a celebration of a woman battered by age and life (*MÀ* 175). Jonathan Gross recognizes that:

*My Ántonia* is emphatically not a story of the boy getting the girl ‘after long years,’ of becoming disappointed with her or sharing in her shame. Rather, it is about a boy attaining the “philosophic mind” to appreciate *Ántonia*'s human dignity (her "grizzled" hair) despite all the hardship she has been through and to accept her unconventionality in the best Byronic, Wordsworthian, and romantic spirit.

It is probably not surprising that in this scene, *Ántonia*'s and Jim's eyes meet and *Ántonia* fixes her looker's eyes in the scene: “we stood looking at each other. The eyes that peered anxiously at me were— simply *Ántonia*'s eyes. [...] She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me” (*MÀ* 175).<sup>25</sup>

While admitting Peter Middleton's theory that the male gaze is the one which “triangulates vision, knowledge, and power” (in Schehr 29), Cather, in the above instance, seems ready to complicate the traditional equation between power, vision, and masculinity. She complicates it even further, by revealing that this power is not always over women and that men also can become “a submissive, objectified object” (Sweeney 1). One example occurs at the Cutters. During the night Jim spend at the Cutters in *Ántonia*'s room, he experiences the “disgustingness” that women in Nebraska, like the hired girls, may be facing in town. In this episode, Cutter creeps back into his own house and up to *Ántonia*'s room.

In this episode, Jim not only becomes the victim of “the detestable bearded countenance that [...] was bending over [him]” (*MÀ* 134), but also ends up bruised by Cutter, hat[ing] [*Ántonia*] almost as much as

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<sup>25</sup> Terence Martin shares a similar point of view, by arguing that “the novel does not present the story of *Ántonia*; it does, I believe, present a drama of memory by means of which Jim Burden tells us how he has come to see *Ántonia* as the epitome of all he has valued” 308). Women are but abstractions and memories that supplant reality.

[he] hated Cutter” (*MÀ* 135). The scene clearly reveals Jim Burden to be unconvincing as a man: Jim not only finds himself in *Ántonia*’s bed, in a feminine passive position, but his “sexlessness—as Grant Overton has argued—is betrayed throughout the novel in details that “no boy would have observed and that a man would not recall. The intonation in some scenes is not in the least masculine” (qtd. in Nettels 148).

Of course, the homosexual tension felt in the scene is relieved through the triangle of desire that Cather builds up. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would probably consider Cutter and Jim’s relationship in this scene as developing what she calls an “homosocial bond” to describe the social bonds between persons of the same sex. At stake here, however, is a triangulation of desire with two men clearly fighting for one (heterosexual) goal, *Ántonia*. Consequently, unconventional (masculine/homo) sexual desire is redirected (and rendered safe), so that the woman becomes both a pretext and alibi. Yet again, in this scene, Jim is further feminized since he becomes as much “object” as “subject” of the gaze: “I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My lip was cut and stood out like a snout. My nose looked like a big blue plum, and one eye was swollen shut and hideously discoloured” (*MÀ* 135).

Because, as Everton explains, “Jim does not want others, and especially men, to find out about this incident” (39), Cather’s here parodies Jim’s possible construction of masculinity, by revealing it as ‘outer’ directed, i.e. as subject to male approval—ultimately therefore, as performance only. Jim asserts: “I could well imagine what the old men down at the drugstore would do with such a theme” (*MÀ* 136). In doing so, Cather delinks masculinity from a necessary or essential connection to dominance and patriarchal power and forces her readers to think of masculinity (just like femininity) as an aesthetic project.

*My Ántonia* reveals that the novel is as much about “My” *Ántonia* as about “My” masculinity, revealing well that Cather has understood Constance Penley and Sharon Willis’ critique of a masculinity that tends to be stabilized (and passed on from one generation to the next, as attested by the reference to Jim’s grandfather figure in this passage) by an association with masculinism, machismo, heterosexism, or heteronormativity (‘Introduction’). Jim experiences the power of the male gaze, one that is linked to the desire to objectify or to demystify in order to objectify (Sweeney 2). In doing so, and by situating Jim in the position of the one to be “looked at,” Cather enriches *Ántonia*’s subjectivity (confined to the extremes of ideal femininity or grotesque masculinity) since she undermines *Ántonia* as the “sole” object of vision and aesthetic enjoyment/disgust. Clearly, and as evidenced from



close reading of certain episodes of looking, the gaze as a tool of (masculine) dominance critical of the emerging New Woman at the nineteenth century's end is complicated by Cather.

Virginia Woolf once claimed: "I detest the masculine point of view. I am bored by his heroism, virtue, and honour. I think the best these men can do is not talk about themselves anymore" (*Pargiters*). Willa Cather, by contrast, embraces the masculine point of view in *My Ántonia*, making of gendered narratology an essential concern in her fiction. Since a masculine voice is presumed to have greater authority, Cather explores the ways women authors might take advantage of this bias by using a male narrator in order to establish and subsequently reveal the performativity of such authority in their writing.

Men, Cather argues, should not stop talking about themselves anymore, because when they do talk, as in *My Ántonia*, they reflect how both manhood and womanhood are perceived, constructed, and performed. If as Carolyn Korsmeyer explains, vision—the quintessential aesthetic sense—possesses "power, [namely] power to objectify and to subject the object of vision to scrutiny and possession," attacking the paradigms of authority inherent in a given text signifies a revisionist attempt to attack male representation. Also, and since "man's control and domination of the written language has trapped women inside a male truth" (Howe 12), attacking the paradigms of authority inherent in a given text signifies a revisionist work to the traditionally male or "marked" history of writing the feminine.

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