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REIMAGINING FEMALE AGENCY ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER: A COMPARATIVE READING OF THOMAS EIDSON'S ALL GOD'S CHILDREN AND WILLA CATHER'S MY ÁNTONIA

The article offers a comparative analysis of female representation in Thomas Eidson's All God's Children (1997) and Willa Cather's My Ántonia (1918), focusing on the ways in which women negotiate gender expectations, social constraints, ethnic and cultural difference, family responsibility, and the demands of frontier life. Although the novels were written in different historical periods, both construct the American frontier as a space in which conventional gender roles are simultaneously reinforced and challenged. Eidson's All God's Children presents Pearl Eddy, a blind Quaker widow who struggles to preserve her farm, raise her four sons, and remain faithful to her principles of nonviolence in a hostile social environment. Her moral authority and practical resourcefulness challenge conventional assumptions concerning female weakness and dependence. The novel also introduces Eiko, whose strength and pragmatism provide another perspective on female resilience and cultural displacement.

Cather's My Ántonia, meanwhile, foregrounds women whose identities are shaped by immigration, agricultural labour, motherhood, economic necessity, and the pursuit of dignity and independence. Ántonia's physical strength, productive labour, and capacity to create a stable family life complicate conventional definitions of femininity. Other female characters, including Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, further expand the spectrum of possible female destinies on the American frontier. Scholarship has particularly emphasized Cather's treatment of gender roles, female self-definition, immigration, and the relationship between women and place.

Using feminist literary criticism, gender studies, and a comparative-historical approach, the article argues that both authors portray women not merely as victims of patriarchal structures but as active agents who negotiate, resist, and sometimes transform those structures. At the same time, the texts reveal the limitations imposed by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and class. The comparison demonstrates that frontier literature can function as a significant space for reconsidering female identity, resilience, labour, morality, and belonging in American culture.

Key words: *female, women's representation, gender roles, feminism, resilience, immigration, identity, Thomas Eidson, Willa Cather, All God's Children, My Ántonia*

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ПЕРЕОСМИСЛЕННЯ ЖІНОЧОЇ СУБ'ЄКТНОСТІ НА АМЕРИКАНСЬКОМУ ФРОНТИРІ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНЕ ПРОЧИТАННЯ ТВОРУ ТОМАСА ЕЙДСОНА «УСІ БОЖІ ДІТИ» ТА РОМАНУ ВІЛЛИ КЕЗЕР «МОЯ АНТОНІЯ»

У статті здійснено порівняльний аналіз репрезентації жіночих образів у романах Томаса Ейдсона All God's Children (1997) та Вілли Кетер My Ántonia (1918). Основну увагу зосереджено на проблемах жіночої суб'єктності, гендерних ролей, соціальної та моральної незалежності, праці, материнства, етнічної ідентичності, дискримінації та виживання в умовах американського фронтиру. Обидва твори, створені в різні історико-культурні періоди, репрезентують фронтир не лише як географічний простір, а і як середовище, у якому традиційні уявлення про жіночність можуть відтворюватися, переосмислюватися та трансформуватися.

У романі Томаса Ейдсона центральним жіночим образом є Перл Едді – сліпа вдова-квакерка, яка самостійно виховує чотирьох синів, веде господарство та намагається зберегти родинну ферму. Попри фізичні, економічні й соціальні обмеження, вона демонструє моральну стійкість, практичну компетентність і здатність самостійно приймати принципові рішення. Її образ руйнує стереотипне уявлення про жінку як пасивну та залежну фігуру. Важливим для аналізу є також образ Ейко, представниці японської родини, через який автор порушує питання етнічної дискримінації, культурної ідентичності та жіночої витривалості.

У романі Вілли Кетер образ Антонії Шимерди репрезентує іншу модель жіночої самореалізації. Праця, фізична витривалість, материнство, зв'язок із землею та здатність протистояти соціальним труднощам формують її як активну суб'єктку власного життя. Поряд з Антонією образи Лени Лінгард і Тіні Содербол розширюють спектр можливих жіночих життєвих стратегій. Дослідження творчості Кетер засвідчують важливість проблем гендерних ролей, самовизначення, імміграції та жіночої суб'єктності в My Antonia.

Теоретичною основою дослідження є феміністична літературна критика, гендерні студії, феміністична наратологія та порівняльно-історичний підхід. Доведено, що обидва автори репрезентують жінок не лише як жертв патріархальних структур, а як активних учасниць формування родини, громади та культурного простору. Водночас твори демонструють обмеження жіночої свободи, зумовлені гендером, класом, етнічністю, релігією та соціальними нормами.

Ключові слова: *жіночі образи, жіноча суб'єктність, американська література, жіноча праця, ідентичність, Томас Ейдсон; Вілла Кетер, «ВСІ божі діти», «Моя Антонія»*

Problem Statement. The representation of women in American frontier literature has traditionally been associated with domesticity, motherhood, sacrifice, and dependence on male authority. However, many literary texts complicate these stereotypes by presenting women as economically productive, morally authoritative, physically resilient, and capable of making independent decisions. This tension is particularly significant in Thomas Eidson's *All God's Children* and Willa Cather's *My* Ántonia, two novels that depict women living within demanding frontier environments.

The central problem addressed in this study is the insufficient comparative examination of how female agency is constructed in these two novels. While Cather's female characters, particularly Ántonia, have received considerable critical attention in discussions of gender, immigration, the frontier, and national

identity, Eidson's female characters have received comparatively less scholarly attention. Cather scholarship has demonstrated that My Ántonia challenges conventional models of female destiny and presents women as important contributors to the social and cultural formation of the American frontier.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.

The famous linguists suggest a strong and potentially original research direction, especially because *My* Ántonia has a substantial critical tradition, while Eidson's novel has received comparatively little sustained academic attention. A particularly relevant study is Lauren Marler's 2024 thesis, *Subverting Gendered Destiny: Willa Cather's Revision of the Bildungsroman in the Great Plains Trilogy.* Marler argues that Cather revises the traditionally male Bildungsroman by challenging conventional definitions of female success. Instead of making marriage or social assimilation the endpoint of female development, Cather gives Ántonia a comparatively affirmative future. This is highly relevant to an argument about agency because Ántonia's achievement is measured not primarily through marriage but through self-determination, labor, motherhood, and her relationship with the land (Marler, 2024). Hanan Abbas Hussein examines Ántonia's transition from a gentle young girl into a physically resilient and independent individual, a shift necessary for her family's survival, which ultimately redefines her identity (Hussein, 2019).

Similarly, articles by Abbas and colleagues examines Cather's representation of the "traditional American woman" in *My* Ántonia through genetic structuralism. The study situates the novel within the social conditions of the Nebraska frontier and emphasizes the tension between traditional gender expectations and women's survival strategies (Abbas, 2022, 2023).

Most recently, Lin Yang and Yuwei Liu's 2026 article, *Willa Cather Revisited: Aesthetic Resistance in My* Ántonia, places Ántonia within a broader argument about immigration, cultural resilience, and resistance to homogenizing modernity. Their interpretation is particularly useful for your project because it conceptualizes Ántonia's resilience as a form of agency rather than merely endurance. The article argues that Cather uses Ántonia's immigrant identity and attachment to the Nebraska landscape to construct an alternative response to modernity (Lin, 2026).

Aim of the Article. The aim of the article is to examine and compare the representation of female figures in Thomas Eidson's All God's Children and Willa Cather's My Ántonia, with particular attention to female agency, gender roles, resilience, labour, family responsibility, ethnic identity, moral autonomy, and social belonging.

The study seeks to demonstrate how both authors complicate conventional representations of women in American frontier literature and construct female characters who negotiate or challenge patriarchal expectations. It also aims to identify similarities and differences in the ways Eidson and Cather represent women's relationships with family, community, land, work, religion, and cultural identity.

Outline of the main material. Thomas Eidson's *All God's Children* (1997) presents female characters negotiating complex social, moral, and racial boundaries in late 19th-century Midwestern America. Central to the narrative is Pearl Eddy, a blind Quaker widow, whose moral integrity and resilience are continuously challenged by societal oppression, racial prejudice, and community hostility. This chapter examines Pearl as a boundary-crossing heroine, analyzes her strategies for survival and agency, and situates her experiences in comparative perspective with Ántonia Shimerda in Willa Cather's *My* Ántonia (1918).

Social and Racial Boundaries

Eidson portrays a community deeply structured by racial and social hierarchies. Pearl's protection of a Black fugitive and a displaced Japanese family situates her in direct opposition to the dominant social order:

"*Racism is rife and the township wants them out, even if that means ostracising Pearl and her children too"* (Eidson, 1997 : 132).

Through Pearl, Eidson examines how social exclusion intersects with gender. While Ántonia's challenges in *My* Ántonia arise primarily from immigrant status and economic hardship Pearl faces additional constraints from systemic racism (Mignon, 1994). Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is applicable here: Pearl's female identity cannot be separated from the racialized social dynamics she confronts (Crenshaw, 1989)

The novel also emphasizes the legal and extralegal enforcement of racial boundaries. The threat of lynching, social ostracism, and discriminatory economic practices exemplifies the multiple layers of restriction that Pearl must navigate. These external boundaries compel her to act decisively and ethically, often at significant personal risk.

Moral Agency and Ethical Responsibility

Pearl's agency is inseparable from her ethical commitments. Her Quaker faith informs her actions, positioning her moral compass as a primary tool for navigating social constraints: *"Her Quaker faith makes her an alien in a community where the narrowminded rule"* (Eidson, 1997 : 152).

Motherhood extends this ethical responsibility. Pearl's care for her own children is intertwined with

her protection of vulnerable others. She demonstrates an understanding of moral courage as relational and communal, asserting influence not only within her family but across social networks. As Harris notes, Pearl's morality is active and performative, requiring both courage and strategic negotiation of communal norms" (Harris, 1990).

In comparison, Ántonia enacts agency within cultural and economic spheres. Her labor and maternal efforts sustain both her family and Bohemian traditions. While Ántonia's challenges are shaped by cultural survival and gendered labor, Pearl's actions are intertwined with the ethical navigation of racial injustice. Both heroines exemplify the concept of active female agency, though in divergent social frameworks.

Psychological Resilience and Inner Voice

Pearl's resilience is both moral and psychological. She navigates fear, vulnerability, and social pressure while making principled choices: *"Every day brought new threats, but I cannot leave them in danger – I must act, even if it costs me everything"* (Eidson, 1997 : 145).

This inner dialogue reflects strategic thinking, balancing risk and protection, echoing Ántonia's optimism and endurance: *"I know it will be hard, but I can manage. We will survive, and the children will grow strong"* (Cather, 1918, p. 87).

Both heroines demonstrate how internal voice and psychological strategies facilitate boundary-crossing. Pearl internalizes moral imperatives to confront societal oppression, while Ántonia employs hope and practical reasoning to navigate immigrant and frontier constraints. These internal processes reflect existential engagement with ethical and social limitations.

Gender Performativity and Social Roles

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a framework for understanding both Pearl and Ántonia. Pearl's repeated acts of caregiving, protection, and moral intervention constitute socially legible performances that simultaneously conform to and subvert normative femininity. Her ethical courage challenges the narrow expectations of women in her community (Butler, 1999).

Similarly, Ántonia's labor and domestic activities enact traditional gender roles but expand their significance. Her labor in the fields and household constitutes a form of social and economic resistance: *"I can work like men now ... I help make this land one good farm"* (Cather, 1918 : 46).

Both heroines exemplify the performative negotiation of gender: through repeated actions, they redefine social expectations while asserting personal autonomy.

Liminality and Boundary-Crossing

Victor Turner's concept of liminality clarifies how both characters occupy transitional spaces. Pearl exists "betwixt and between" acceptance and exclusion, negotiating thresholds of racial, social, and gendered boundaries. Ántonia inhabits liminal spaces between childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy, and old-world and American cultural frameworks. These liminal positions allow both heroines to exercise agency, reinterpret social norms, and engage in transformative practices (Turner, 1969). *"She seemed to belong to the land itself, its strength and endurance reflected in her own body"* (Cather, 1918 : 112).

The prairie and township settings function as symbolic spaces mediating boundary-crossing. In *All God's Children*, Kansas represents both danger and moral opportunity; in My Ántonia, the Nebraska landscape challenges and sustains Ántonia, providing a liminal arena in which identity is actively constructed

Comparative Analysis

Pearl and Ántonia share thematic concerns, including resilience, ethical agency, and negotiation of structural limitations. Their differences illuminate the effects of social context on female experience:

– Nature of Barriers: Pearl faces explicit racial oppression and community hostility; Ántonia confronts economic, cultural, and gendered barriers in an immigrant context.

– Source of Agency: Pearl's agency is morally and ethically defined, often in direct conflict with social norms; Ántonia's agency emerges from labor, cultural perseverance, and familial responsibility.

– Narrative Perspective: Eidson provides direct access to Pearl's consciousness, enhancing reader understanding of her moral and psychological deliberation; Cather mediates Ántonia's inner life through Jim Burden's narration.

– Liminality: Both navigate transitional social spaces, though Pearl's liminality is defined by racialized moral boundaries, whereas Ántonia's is cultural and generational.

Both texts depict women as active agents who negotiate social, moral, and existential limits. By analyzing these heroines comparatively, scholars gain insight into how literature represents female agency across diverse historical, cultural, and social contexts.

In *All God's Children*, Pearl Eddy exemplifies a morally courageous, boundary-crossing female figure, negotiating racial, social, and gendered constraints while maintaining psychological resilience and ethical integrity. Comparative analysis with Ántonia Shimerda demonstrates both convergent and divergent forms of female agency: while Ántonia navigates cultural, economic, and gendered barriers, Pearl's chal-

lenges are intensified by racial injustice. Both heroines illustrate how women in literature actively construct identity, exert moral and social influence, and negotiate liminal spaces to achieve self-determination.

In *All God's Children*, Pearl integrates motherhood, ethical responsibility, and resilience to navigate racial, social, and gendered boundaries, while Ántonia negotiates economic, cultural, and gendered constraints, illustrating distinct yet comparable pathways of female agency in American frontier and Midwestern narratives.

Conclusion. The comparative analysis of Thomas Eidson's *All God's Children* and Willa Cather's *My* Ántonia demonstrates that female figures occupy a central position in the construction of the American frontier experience. Although the novels differ considerably in historical context, narrative technique, and literary style, both authors challenge the assumption that frontier women should be understood primarily through domesticity, dependence, and submission.

Pearl Eddy represents one of Eidson's most significant models of female agency. As a blind Quaker widow, mother, farmer, and moral decision-maker, she occupies a socially vulnerable position while nevertheless exercising considerable authority over her household and ethical choices. Her commitment to nonviolence and her willingness to shelter marginalized people demonstrate that feminine strength in the novel is not dependent upon physical power. Instead, it is expressed through moral courage, practical intelligence, compassion, and perseverance. Eidson similarly expands the novel's representation of female resilience by introducing questions of ethnicity, displacement, and cultural prejudice.

Cather's Ántonia likewise challenges conventional definitions of femininity. Her physical labour, determination, motherhood, and relationship with the land transform her from an immigrant girl into an independent and productive woman. The novel also complicates the traditional marriage-centered model of female fulfillment by presenting several possible paths of female self-realization. Recent scholarship similarly argues that Cather revises conventional female Bildungsroman patterns and offers Ántonia a hopeful destiny rather than the tragic conclusion traditionally associated with female protagonists.

At the same time, both novels reveal the limitations placed upon women by patriarchal social structures. Female agency does not mean complete freedom. Women remain affected by economic dependence, social judgment, ethnic prejudice, family obligations, and culturally prescribed gender roles. This tension between constraint and agency is one of the principal similarities between the two works.

Ultimately, Eidson and Cather present the frontier not merely as a geographical setting but as a symbolic space in which gender identities can be negotiated and reconstructed. Their female characters demonstrate that survival, moral authority, creativity, and social contribution are not exclusively masculine qualities. Through Pearl, Eiko, Ántonia, Lena, Tiny, and other female figures, the novels contribute to a broader understanding of American identity in which women are active participants in the creation of families, communities, and cultural memory.

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