







The New American Women Concept as Modern Women in the Novel *My Mortal Enemy* by Willa Cather: A Feminist Literary Criticism

Abbas Abbas ^(✉), M. Amir Pattu , Fathu Rahman , and Abidin Pammu 

Cultural Sciences Faculty, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia
abbas@unhas.ac.id

Abstract. This article discusses one of the phenomena in American social life at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, namely the emergence of the typical New American Women. They are known as modern women who reconstruct Victorian values in traditional American society. This phenomenon was documented by Willa Cather in her fictional works entitled *My Mortal Enemy* in 1926. It features a female character named Nellie Birdeyes who builds a new conception of women in America. This research helps literary readers to find social facts in the world of literature so that they can be used as life guidelines and educational media. Feminist literary criticism which narrates the social atmosphere of women in gender relations is used as a method of study in conceptualizing *New American Women* in the novel *My Mortal Enemy*. This criticism emphasizes the emergence of women who are able to bring changes in people's lives so that the views of marginality and inferiority against women turn into justice and equality. Literary works are considered as a medium for imaging the roles of women and men related to certain social conditions. This research results a conception of *New American Women*, namely the emergence of a new woman who is seen as a modern woman in her day. Their emergence is estimated between the 1890s and 1920s which carries the notion of renewal on socio-cultural construction. They want to rationalize the role of women in household, family, and community life. They are generally young women who want to reposition the dominance of men's rights over women, such as the need for women to also be given property rights, economic access, and education outside the home. The presence of *New American Women* is played by Nellie Birdeyes in the novel *My Mortal Enemy*.

Keywords: Modern · New America Women · Novel *My Mortal Enemy* · Women

1 Introduction

Modern is often identified as the novelty of social facts that exist in society and modernization is a renewal movement that seeks to change the social order that has been embraced by society for tens or even hundreds of years. Modern and modernization have an impact on the occurrence of social changes in the pattern of social relations,

including gender relations between men and women. Women's awareness that is driven by changes in social conditions in the social order is one of the causes for the emergence of new ideas to reposition the values and position of women in various aspects of life. For example, the desire of women to participate in the public world in the fields of economy and education is seen as a new idea to reposition the values and position of traditional women which are characterized by domestication patterns. These new ideas which are considered as the spirit of modern women generally arise because of the wider employment opportunities in the public sector and the increasing welfare of people in urban areas as a result of the industrial revolution as happened in Europe and America in the 19th and 20th centuries.

One of the phenomena related to the modernization of American society is the emergence of new ideas among young women at the end of the 19th century, especially the educated to expand the arena of women's lives in the public sphere in the economic and education sectors. They initiated the presence of women in the world of work in factories, offices, properties, and others without losing their traditional roles as mothers for their children and wives for their husbands. The idea of these young American women is the ideal that gave rise to the idea of *New American Women* which brings renewal and change in the fabric of American society. According to Lan [1], the emergence of a new society is generally driven by a change in the situation in society which results in the birth of the idea of renewal or change. The idea can be in the form of a complete rejection known as a revolutionary movement, while a partial rejection is called repositioning or transformation. The idea of *New American Women* tends to be a partial rejection of the total domestication of women as adopted by traditional American women from Victorian values.

Authors as part of a transforming society always voice or support the idea of change in imaginative products, namely literary works. Willa Cather is an American woman writer who seems to have participated in observing the emergence of the idea of young American women as a *New American Women* conception that emphasizes the repositioning of roles in line with changing times. One of her novels that constructs the idea of *New American Women* is *My Mortal Enemy* [2] through her fictional character named Nellie Birdseyes. She is an educated young woman who observes the problems of family life and household conflicts of the old people around her. She feels the life of her parents and her family who uphold traditional values as mother and wife in the domesticated life of women like Aunt Lydia. On the other hand, she witnessed the lives of glamorous women like Mrs. Myra Henshawe who at the end of her life regrets her fate and blames her past life. Nellie Birdseyes appears as a young woman who presents new ideas on two different sides of life between Aunt Lydia and Mrs. Myra Henshawe which is in line with the *New American Women's* conception.

The research in this article is a literary study that focuses on the relationship between the presences of a young woman named Nellie Birdseyes in the novel *My Mortal Enemy* with the emergence of a new life order that remains tolerant of traditional community values. The appearance of Nellie Birdseyes in the fictional story is analyzed as part of the historical facts of American women in the 19th and 20th centuries who initiated the concept of *New American Women*. The analysis is carried out by relying on one of the

methods of literary studies, namely feminist literary criticism. It emphasizes the conditions, roles, positions, values, ideas, and so on of female fictional characters in literary works as a reflection of the social phenomena of women in society. Leichner [3] has researched a number of works of fiction in the period 1900–1935 that document the repositioning of American women from traditional to modern, but he did not conceptualize *New American Women* in these repositions. This research was conducted to reinforce the conception of *New American Women* as modern women in the novel *My Mortal Enemy* by Willa Cather in 1926. Confirmation of the conception of *New American Women* in this article is needed to determine the typical and notion of modern American women in that era.

2 Methodology

Narrating the concept of *New American Women* in the novel *My Mortal Enemy* must be built from a research based on the scientific method so that this article can be categorized as a scientific paper. It requires limiting the understanding of modern American women referred to this study and the operational basis of feminist literary criticism in the conception of *New American Women*.

2.1 Modern American Women

Every period or period that gave birth to a new social order can be categorized as a modern society in its era. It is also the case with the emergence of a new notion of young American women according to Rabinovitch [4], it is thought to have emerged between the 1890s and 1920s as modern American women at that time. They want to rationalize the role of women in household, family, and community life who want to reposition the domination of men's rights over women, such as the need for women to also be given property rights, economic access and education outside the home. Although they wanted to reform, they did not completely reject the Victorian values that had dominated the notion of European and American women since the early 19th century (Fig. 1).

Modern women who want to reposition Victorian values in the domestication of American women emerged when the order of American society underwent a change due to the rapid development of industrialization, technological advances, settlement expansion to the west of America, increasing urbanization to big American cities, and others. Djajanegara [5] views modern women as new American women, while Victorian women are seen as old American women. Society identifies the new typical American women through ideas and appearances.

Hymowitz, et al., [6] assessed that the concept of *New American Women* initiated by modern American women did not deny the position of women as wives of their husbands and mothers for their children as the values instilled by traditional women, but they wanted rationalization and repositioning women over male domination in public life. They want women to also be given a role in participating in making a living, working, and doing activities outside the home. Their desire is to improve the fate of women in the family environment in order to obtain wider rights in obtaining economic and educational access. This desire led to a cultural reconstruction of the fabric of American society.



Fig. 1. Young women as typical of modern American women who joined the association of New American Women in 1890. (Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=image+new+american+women&tbm>. Accessed on June 4, 2022 at 00⁰³ p.m.)

Modern American women in this study are young women who are single and still believe that having a household is part of the natural nature of women. They formed several informal associations called the New American Women's group. Based on the explanation in this section, it can be understood that modern American women in the 1890s and 1920s were typical as *New American Women* as follows:

1. Young educated women with more elegant clothes and styles.
2. Have property rights, economic access, and access to education outside the home.
3. Accepted partially Victorian values in the nature of women.
4. Emerged in the midst of rapid industrialization, technological advances, settlement expansion to the west of America, increasing urbanization to large American cities, and others.
5. Desired rationalization and repositioning of women over male domination in public life.
6. Initiated a cultural reconstruction in American society.

2.2 Feminist Literary Criticism

Fictional stories always present male and female characters who build controversial events. The presence of the two sexes in fiction according to Abbas [7] is the cause of gender relations among characters which result various gender issues such as women's emancipation, sexual violence, sexual deviation, sexual discrimination, feminism, gender bias, and others. The issue of gender is in the spotlight of literary reviewers to explore the missions played by men and women in the story. Pattu, et al., [8] asserted that fictional characters are present in the story with a certain mission desired by the author such as social criticism, moral messages, resistance to tyranny, issue clarification, entertainment, and others. An analysis of gender issues related to the author's mission in her literary work can be done using one of the literary research methods called feminist literary criticism.

Feminist literary criticism is a study that focuses on women's issues related to roles, positions, ideas, performance, values, and so on in the world of literature. Fiction stories are often used as a medium to portray social relations between men and women, especially those related to inequality, injustice, and discrimination. In such conditions, women are often presented as fighters who aspire to change and reform in gender relations in order to elevate the dignity of women. Wiyatmi [9] expressed her opinion on feminist literary criticism as a literary study that focuses more on gender relations. This study is needed to fulfill a sense of justice in the condition of women in literary works. The target of feminist literary criticism is to narrate the social inequality experienced by women over the domination and superiority of men in the world of literature and society. It is also supported by the explanation of Sugihastuti and Suharto [10] that an analysis of women's social conditions must be built from certain knowledge about gender relations between men and women in public life.

Gender relations between men and women give rise to differentiating identities between men and women in social reality or cultural products and in the world of fiction or literary products. The presence of social reality in literary works is the basis for feminist literary criticism emphasizing analysis on the structural elements of literary works, authors, and readers. These three elements are often seen as an intertwined correlation in universal meaning because according to Pammu, et al., [11] the character of the story is present in a certain position because the author reflects on it based on his understanding of social reality, including literary readers. This correlation is able to create universal values as stated by Rahman and Sukardi Weda [12] that literature is able to carry important issues in order to build universal human awareness, including the awareness of literary readers on gender issues.

The technical procedure for analyzing the novel *My Mortal Enemy* by Willa Cather in this study uses the integration of the application of feminist literary criticism from Wiyatmi [9] and Sugihastuti and Suharto [10]. The procedures are synchronized in the following as:

1. To understand the structural aspects of the novel *My Mortal Enemy*.
2. To examine the roles, positions, ideas, performances, values, and so on of female figures in various events.
3. To examine the relationship of male and female figures in the creation of certain gender relations issues.
4. To analyze the conception of New American Women initiated by the fictional character Nellie Birdeyes as a typical of modern American woman in the novel *My Mortal Enemy*.
5. To make the conclusion of the analysis.

3 Result and Discussion

This study focuses on two main aspects of the analysis of the novel *My Mortal Enemy* with reference to the procedure of feminist literary criticism. The first is the meaning of the structure of the novel *My Mortal Enemy* which includes a synopsis, descriptions of female characters, and issues of gender relations. The second is the conception of *New American Women* promoted by Nellie Birdeyes as a typical of modern American woman in the novel *My Mortal Enemy*.

3.1 The Structural Meaning of Novel *My Mortal Enemy*

This novel tells the story of a woman who lives in the rich family named Myra Driscoll. She was raised by his uncle John Driscoll who owned a number of companies and a large house with a large yard. Driscoll was the richest man in a small town called Parthia, south of Illinois. Myra wants to image herself as a modern woman by relying on wealth and a glamorous lifestyle as social class prestige. Her wish had a problem and failed to be realized. Her life changed drastically when she was getting old, she lived poor and lived in a simple apartment. Her husband, Oswald Henshawe, could no longer afford to provide her with luxuries after he was dismissed as a Railroad Company Officer due to the company's massive layoffs during the American Economic Depression.

Myra Driscoll Henshawe had a best friend when she was a teenager in Parthia named Aunt Lydia and her family. Their friendship continued when Myra married Henshawe and lived in New York. When Aunt Lydia visited Mrs. Myra Henshawe in New York and celebrating Christmas and New Year's Eve, she witnessed Myra's glamorous lifestyle with artists, writers, officials, businessmen and famous people. Aunt Lydia judged that Myra was wrong in initiating a new American woman who was built on material prestige and wealth because all of these were fictitious and not rooted in the social fabric.

In the midst of the conflict in the meaning of women's renewal between Aunt Lydia, who leans towards traditional Victorian values, and Mrs. Myra Henshawe who thinks material values are everything, appears a young, educated girl named Nellie Birdeyes. She is Aunt Lydia's niece who studied hard from school to university and eventually chose the profession of teacher and researcher at American educational institutions as her service to society. She also initiated the renewal of American women by prioritizing the rationalization and repositioning of women in the public sector. Her desire is in line with the conception of *New American Women* which was initiated by educated American women in social organizations.

As part of the structural meaning of feminist literary criticism, the researchers describe female characters and their gender relations, namely Myra Driscoll Henshawe, Aunt Lydia, and Nellie Birdeyes.

3.1.1 Myra Driscoll Henshawe

She lived with her uncle in a mansion in Parthia and became the sole heir to John Driscoll's estate. Her inheritance rights were canceled after she eloped with a simple young man named Oswald Henshawe. They lived in downtown New York in a luxury apartment north of Madison Square. They enjoyed wealth and luxury after Oswald Henshawe became a high-ranking official in the Railway Company. Mrs. Myra Henshawe tries to appear as a typical new woman who has many relationships and friends from the elite. She often performs festive and glamorous parties while inviting famous people from among artists, businessmen, politicians, officials, and others, "*Her friends, I found, were of two kinds: artistic people-actors, musicians, literary men... And another group whom she called her "moneyed" friends...*" [2].

Myra's glamorous lifestyle only lasted a few years as her family's economy fell drastically. The wealth and property of Mrs. Myra Henshawe relies heavily on her husband's economic capacity. When the Railway Company along with a number of other

companies experienced financial difficulties due to the economic depression so that the company's management was streamlined, Oswald Henshawe was also dismissed. These conditions drastically changed Myra's situation, namely there were no more glamorous parties, socialite friends shunned her, sold her luxury apartment, moved to a slum in a very simple apartment on the West coast of America. Her glamorous lifestyle and complete dependence on her husband's income made Mrs. Myra Henshawe failed to fulfill her dream of becoming a typical new woman. At the end of his life, he always regretted his situation, "*Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?*" [2].

3.1.2 Aunt Lydia

She is the younger sister of her mother Nellie Birdeyes and lives in a small town called Parthia. She is friends with Myra Driscoll, including being a mediator of the love affair between Myra Driscoll and Oswald Henshawe. She and Nellie had been invited to New York by Mrs. Myra Henshawe attended the Christmas and New Year celebrations. She witnessed Mrs. Myra Henshawe who always held meetings with business colleagues who were generally Germans in a large room while sitting around a large table, "*The business friends seemed to be nearly all Germans. On Sunday we called at alf-a-dozen or more big houses*" [2]. Mrs. Myra Henshawe looked dignified and the other women were afraid of her, they did not dare refuse her every wish. They are rich people who are termed moneyed as a place to harvest money.

Aunt Lydia is a simple person who is typical of traditional women as taught by Victoria. She is a happy housewife with her husband and three sons. She did not have the ambition to be the new American woman like Mrs. Myra Henshawe is ambitious to be different from other women. Aunt Lydia enjoys her home life while preparing her niece, Nellie Birdeyes, as a young woman who will face changes in American society. She supported Nellie's education, instilled modesty, encouraged a spirit of independence, and taught a love of family.

3.1.3 Nellie Birdeyes

She is the niece of Aunt Lydia who also lives in Parthia with her mother. Nellie Birdeyes is estimated to be 27 years younger than Mrs. Myra Henshawe. When she was about 18 years old, she first met Myra, who was already 45 years old at that time. Mrs. Myra Henshawe with her husband, Mr. Henshawe visited Parthia, Illinois on a railroad business to the American west, "*Her husband, who had a position in the New York offices of an Eastern railroad, was coming West on business, and they were going to stop over for two days in Parthian...*" [2]. Mrs. Myra Henshawe arrival in Parthia was the first time after leaving her hometown decades ago then getting married and living in New York. Nellie's mother and Aunt Lydia reminisce with Mrs. Myra and her husband, Mr. Henshawe recalled some past events in Parthia in the meeting. Nellie was impressed by the typical Mrs. Myra is well-spoken, humorous, aggressive, lively, and intelligent.

Nellie's intimacy with Mrs. Myra Henshawe took place when she and Aunt Lydia visited New York for a Christmas and New Year celebration to fulfill Mrs. Myra Henshawe's invitation. While in New York, Nellie observed a lot of typical women and men in various aspects such as character, mindset, relationships, fashion, and gender relations

in domestic life. Then at Nellie's 30s, she happened to meet Mrs. Myra Henshawe, who was in her 60s at the time, was in the America's West-Coast City. At that time, Nellie worked in educational institutions in the fields of teaching and research.

Nellie saw the physical condition of Mr. Oswald Henshawe and Mrs. Mary Henshawe was older than their real age because of the heavy burdens of life she carried. She compared the state of the family's apartment room back then when she was in New York which was all luxurious and spacious with his life now in a very simple and narrow room, what an ironic sight. Mrs. Myra Henshawe admits that she failed to realize her ambition of becoming a new woman and instead she now compares herself to Mr. Oswald Henshawe are a pair of old foxes temporarily buried in the ground, "*And we so safely hidden-in earth, like a pair of old foxed!*" [2].

3.2 Conception of New American Women in Novel *My Mortal Enemy* by Willa Cather

Nellie Birdeyes looks at three different types of women positively, namely herself, Aunt Lydia, and Mrs. Myra Henshawe. She was an independent and educated young woman, Aunt Lydia was a simple and family-loving traditional woman, then Mrs. Myra Henshawe is a wealthy woman who is optimistic, passionate, and full of ambition. The collaboration of these three typical women is the conception of *New American Women*, namely educated women who are simple, independent, love their families, optimistic, enthusiastic, and full of aspirations. American women with these types are considered modern women at that time.

Nellie Birdeyes in the novel *My Mortal Enemy* has some typical of modern American women of the 1890s and 1920s as *New American Women*, namely educated young women who are more tolerant; have property rights, economic access, and access to education in the public world; partially accept Victorian values in the nature of women; emerged in the midst of the rapid development of industrialization, technological advances, expansion of settlements to the western region of America, increasing urbanization to large American cities, and others; and wants the rationalization and repositioning of women over male domination in public life.

3.2.1 Educated Young Women Who Tolerant

Nellie Birdeyes is a young woman who has a formal education as told in the novel that when she had just graduated from high school, she met Mrs. Myra Henshawe in Parthia [2]. She was able to live in harmony with Aunt Lydia who held strong traditional Victorian values and Mrs. Myra Henshawe, who has ambitions, wants to portray herself as a new woman. This fact indicates that she is a tolerant young educated woman.

3.2.2 Having Property Rights, Economic Access, and Access to Education in the Public World

Nellie Birdeyes works in the public sector at an educational institution that deals with teaching and research in West-Coast City [2]. This access indicates that she has property rights and economic access that is different from traditional women who fully live in a family environment and domestication of the household.

3.2.3 Partially Accept Victorian Values in the Nature of Women

Nellie Birdeyes does not reject marriage and household as part of the domestication of women in Victorian values, but she wants women not to be completely closed off from access to public life such as careers and education. She has proven that she can also provide public access to the community through education and at the same time earn her own income. She can also be able to get along with various groups without completely leaving family life.

3.2.4 Appearance in the Midst of Rapid Industrialization, Technological Advances, Residential Expansion into the American West, and Increasing Urbanization into America's Major Cities

Nellie Birdeyes was born and a teenager in a small town called Parthia, in southern Illinois. The town had only one rich man named John Driscoll. After twenty years later the cities in the American West region experienced rapid progress. This prompted many frontiers from the agricultural areas to enter the cities in search of work. The increasing number of residents in the West is due to the more advanced means of rail transportation as the company led by Mr. Henshawe. Nellie witnessed and experienced the progress of American society which had an impact on social change so that she needed the idea of New American Women.

3.2.5 Desiring Rationalization and Repositioning of Women Over Male Domination in Public Life

Nellie Birdeyes observes the social problems of gender relations between men and women in families and households. She witnessed Mrs. Myra Henshawe to her husband, Mr. Henshawe. Similarly, she learned that John Driscoll had disqualified his niece, Myra Driscoll. These two facts made Nellie think that she must be independent and have access to her own economy as part of the rationalization and repositioning of women over male domination in public life.

4 Conclusion

The reforms and changes initiated by young American women in repositioning Victorian values that domesticated American women were considered modern women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They conceptualize New American Women as educated women who are simple, independent, loving family, optimistic, enthusiastic, and full of aspirations. Nellie Birdeyes in the novel *My Mortal Enemy* has several typical American modern women who reflect *New American Women*, namely, educated young women who are tolerant, have public access to the property and education sectors, partially accept Victorian values, appear in the midst of rapid development and change in America's big cities, rationalizing and repositioning women's access to male domination in public life.

As a suggestion for further research related to the issue of *New American Women* in the novel *My Mortal Enemy* is to explore the ideas of modern American women in Willa Cather's thoughts. As the author of the novel, she must have a background of experience

and knowledge in the conception of modern women which is poured imaginatively in works of fiction.

References

1. Lan, Thung Ju. (2015). Perempuan dan Modernisasi. *Jurnal Masyarakat dan Budaya* 17 (1), 17–28.
2. Cather, Willa. (1990). *My Mortal Enemy*. New York: Vintage Classic.
3. Lechner, Amber Harris. (2012). *To Bend Without Breaking: American Women Authorship and The New Women, 1900–1935*. Dissertation. USA: University of Nebraska, Lincoln.
4. Rabinovitch, Einav. (2022). Definition of the New Woman. Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/Americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-427> (Accessed: June 4, 2022 at 00.26 p.m.).
5. Djajaningara, Soenarjati. (2000). *Kritik Sastra Feminis: Sebuah pengantar*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
6. Hymowitz, Carol and Michaela Weissman. (1978). *A History of Women In America*. United States of America: Bantam Books.
7. Abbas, Abbas. (2021). The Similarity of Indonesian and British Women's Views on Marriage in the Novels Alisjahbana's *Layar Terkembang* and Austen's *Pride And Prejudice*. *International Proceeding of ICLC-2; 4th November 2021, University of Hasanuddin*. Netherlands: Atlantis Press, 1–6.
8. Pattu, Amir, Burhanuddin Arafah, and Mutmainnah. (2022). Racial Discrimination Experienced by Black People as Reflected in Langston Hughes's Poems. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 13 (2), 350–356.
9. Sugihastuti and Suharto. (2016). *Kritik Sastra Feminis: teori dan aplikasinya*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
10. Wiyatmi. (2012). *Kritik Sastra: teori dan aplikasinya dalam Sastra Indonesia*. Yogyakarta: Ombak.
11. Pammu, Abidin, Sitti Sahraeny, and Damayanti. (2021). The Discrimination of Main Characters in Twain's *The Prince and The Pauper*. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 4 (2), 169–177.
12. Rahman, Fathu and Sukardi Weda. (2018). Students' Perceptions in Appreciating English Literary Works through Critical Comment: A Case Study at Hasanuddin University and Universitas Negeri Makassar. Retrieved from https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=fathu+rahman+unhas&oq=fathu+rahman+unhas (Accessed: August 11, 2022: 7.35)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

