

# Self-Actualization

## —A Critical Comparison between Antonia and Other Minor Characters

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**Abstract**—This thesis concerns on the theme of growth and self-actualization in *My Antonia* in terms of Maslow's need hierarchy theory, studying characters' satisfactions of different levels of needs and evaluating their developments. Maslow's need hierarchy theory indicates that individual's behavior is motivated by the five layers of needs, and the gratifications of needs parallel with and influence one's growth and development. To some extent, the theory of human needs can serve as the generalization and summarization of human's course of initiation and self-actualization. By comparing the heroin's course initiation with that of other minor characters, the thesis draws a distinctive vision of truly self-realized person as Antonia.

**Keywords**—*Antonia; Growth; Self-actualization; Maslow; Need Hierarchy*

### I. INTRODUCTION

In American literature, Willa Cather devoted herself into the depiction of the pioneers' development and self-fulfillment in the cultivation of the west land. Her literary achievements rest mainly on her works set in Nebraska portraying the frontier life of immigrants, among which, the three novels: *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of The Lark* and *My Antonia* are known as the Trilogy of pioneers, they are considered as her best novels.

Willa Cather's series of works are colored with the features of the initiation story. Her works embody her childhood experience in the land on the Nebraska prairie, where she grew up with the pioneering European immigrants. Especially in *My Antonia*, she transformed all her memories into arts.

In this novel, Bohemian girl Antonia, at fourteen, migrates with her family to Nebraska in the west America with high expectations of the new life. After countered with a chain of misfortunes in their first several months on the new land, her father committed suicide and she has to take a large part of responsibility for supporting the family. In order to improve the family living financially, she goes to the town to work as a servant at the Harlings. Life in the town as a hired girl grants her more independence both economically and mentally. She embraces joy, freedom and her first love though all of this ended in the betrayal and cheating by her loved man. Being pregnant, she returns to the countryside and works as farmhand so hardly in order to forget and recover from the misfortune. After her baby birth, she marries Cuzak, a Bohemian man, and work arduously shoulder by shoulder with her husband to establish an ideal home breeding a large flock of lively, healthy

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children.

*My Antonia* is mainly accepted and reviewed as feminist writing due to her unconventional views embodied in her heroines. In the recent decade, new trends of applying ecological or ecofeminist perspectives emerge in researches of Cather's works. This thesis focuses on the theme of growth and self-actualization in *My Antonia* applying Maslow's need hierarchy theory to study characters' satisfactions in different levels of needs and to evaluate their developments. Meanwhile, this thesis gain enlightenment on individual's growth and self-actualization in the modern times from the psychological study of the novel.

According to Maslow's theory of self-actualization, the profound difference between self-actualizing people and others can be seen clearly. The self-actualizing people no longer strive in the ordinary sense, but rather develop. In other words, ordinary people strive to for the basic needs gratifications that they lack, which are largely determined and affected by others and the outside world, while self-actualizing people, who have already fulfilled the basic needs, attempt to develop more and more fully in their own styles which benefit their growth and maturation. The self-actualizing people tend to seek development within the inner mind and thoughts and exert more influence on others.

### II. ANALYSIS OF THE INITIATIONS IN MY ANTONIA

#### A. Antonia's Initiation

In this novel, Antonia experiences the striving for different needs gratifications from the lower levels to the top level and embodies the course of individual's self-fulfillment. Some critics regard Antonia as "an earth goddess":

*She is a re-creation of an archetypal pattern-woman as the embodiment of self-assured if not self-contained physical fertility which insures the endurance of the race. [1]*

Throughout her growing from the adolescent stage to the mature middle age, Antonia has an increasingly rational and clear knowledge about herself and the environment. No matter what misfortunes fall on, Antonia just bears without complaints. In face of her father's suicide, mother's carelessness and coldness, brother's mistreatment, man-made evils together with the harsh wild land, never does she despair and give up striving for a better future. She knows clearly what she wants and where she tends to go and simply keeps advancing towards the direction she installs ahead in spite of so much unfavorable

factors domestically and socially. Since her mind and behavior are less based on wish, desire and imagination, so, hardly can we feel a trace of loss or confusion from Antonia, which is common for most immigrants surrounded with kinds of disadvantages. In her eye's, the land offers hope while brings troubles and tortures. With the "innocent eyes" as Herbert Read called, she accepts the land and adapts to it with a deep affection. Out of a tender love, little Antonia even puts a wild green insect in her hair to give it shelter when playing on the prairie with Jim. She loves every minor things of the nature communicating with them actively and vigorously and pours all her love and energy to cultivate the land into fruitful garden. "Antonia kept stopping to tell me about tree and another. 'I love them as if they were people.' she said, 'There wasn't a tree here when we first came. We planted every one, and used to carry water for them after we'd been working in the fields all day. They were on my mind like children. Many a night after he was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things. ' "[1]For ordinary people, earning living on the wildly broken land is a torture, but for self-actualizing person, it is a pleasantly stimulating challenge, a high spot in life rather than a low.

In addition to her special perception and acceptance of the nature, her natural communication with the outside world and acceptance of others also helps a lot in her self-actualization.

As new comers into the west, she makes herself understood in a quite natural way with her outstanding language ability. Without any artificial manner, she is good at story-telling and her talking is really joyous, "everything she said seemed to come out of her heart and her voice had a peculiarly engaging quality, it was deep, a little husky, and one always heard the breath vibrating behind it." Her simplicity and loyalty to friends never embarrass her in facing the outside world even in awkward situations.

She lives spontaneously in her styles paying little attention to the conventional rituals even though she awfully hurt by her rebellion against Mr. Harling for her happiness of dancing, her choosing to serve the money-lender Mr. Cutter and her attempt to marry the heartless Larry. All her misfortunes are not resulted from her nature but from the social evils. However, she never regrets having making those choices as she regards the past experience as a source of pushing force. When Jim said that she ought never to have gone to town where she suffers so much from man-made evils she just says:

*Oh, I'm glad I went! I'd never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping if I hadn't. I learned nice ways at the Harlings', and I've been able to bring my children up so much better. I'm glad I had a chance to learn; but I'm thankful none of my daughters will ever have to work out. The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved. [1]*

Owing to the positive and tolerant mind, she marries Anton Cuzak and embraces her family happiness. Take the early 20th century social situation into consideration; it is great for her to set up the family on the basis of mutual respect and quality between the two genders. Even her husband knows little about farming and used to get discouraged, she just shoulders the hard labor and always being tolerable with Anton's apolastic behavior. Eventually, her endurance and understanding

awakens and cheers her husband up. As Anton said to Jim, "She ain't always so strict with me, neither. Sometimes maybe I drink a little too much beer in town, and when I come home she don't say nothing. She don't ask me questions. We always get along with fine, her and me, like at first. Yes, she is a good wife for a poor man." She breaks the patriarchal net and holds a new idea to keep the family harmoniously, which serves as a counterpart of these conventional families such as her parents', the Harlings', the Cutters'.

Without arguing the matter or demanding that it be otherwise, she tends to see the reality clearly instead of distorting or coloring it from a narrow spectacle. As a self-actualizing person, because of her mental independence and strong will, she is able to accept herself not only on these lower levels, but at all levels including existence, love, safety, belongingness, and esteems as she tells her experience to Jim,

*No, I never got down-hearted. Anton is a good man, and I loved my children and always believed they would turn out well. I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. And I don't mind work a bit, if I don't have to put up sadness. [1]*

Throughout her growing, she maintains a relative stability in the face of blows, betray, deprivations, frustrations and never loses head in the midst of circumstances that would drive ordinary people to suicide.

Antonia succeeds in many ways though her achievement does not have much to do with material and money. After twenty years' departure, when her best friend Jim meets her in her large-size family living harmoniously on their farm full of vigor and vitality, she achieves both the fertility of the family and the fertility of the soil. To Jim's surprise, after so much suffering and hard laboring Antonia grow stronger with time, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished. "She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl, but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples. To make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions." [2]As Cather praises, "she was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." [3]So it is no wonder that all her boys and girls stand good and straight and they are all proud of her.

Self-actualizing people are not only well accepted by family and society but also exert profound influence on people around them. How much people can mean to each other? Jim spares no admiration when recalls their precious and the incommunicable past,

*I'd have liked to have you for a sweet-heart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister, anything that a woman can be to a man. [1]*The course of self-actualization is concentrating much more on individual inner world though it is built up on the basic gratifications. Moreover, self-actualization is about individual's development of potential, characters, personalities and virtues. As Aristotle teaches that only through their own

efforts can men reach their ideal situation of happiness.[4] He believes that happiness and virtue are permanent, stable in the long run, which can endure all changes and tests of fortune. No matter how bitter the sorrows are, as long as men maintain virtues and dignity and endure the hardship and develop the potentials into full display, self-fulfillment and happiness can be gained at last.

Besides self-actualizing heroin Antonia, Cather especially depicts a self-actualizing minor character, the African American pianist d'Arnault. As a blind child living on an antebellum plantation, d'Arnault can't resist music. In spite of threats of punishments, he still tries his best and all kinds of ways to get to the piano in his mistress' room.

*He wore his teachers out. He could never learn like other people, never acquired any finish. He was always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses. [1]*

*He needs music even as other people need food and water. Once seated at the piano, he looked like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong savage blood. [1]* Although the racism is clearly striking in Cather's description, her praise is very impressive too. If the black pianist is insulted, he also is presented as a musical genius, a born artist, just as Antonia's father Mr. Shimerda. Though Cather does not go to more length to describe Blind d'Arnault, his success is obvious and demands attention. On one hand, d'Arnault functions as contrast with Mr. Shierda who failed to fulfill his dream of artist; On the other hand, d' Arnault sighifies art that is sensual and full of forbidden pleasure. Arriving in Black Hawk, he represents the "one break in the dreary monotony of that month" [2], the black pianist brings warmth and new vitality. With all his talent for music develops into full blossom, he is remembered as a fertility god. In this sense, he is truly self-fulfilled.

In Cather's works, the self-actualizing characters, no matter what kind of profession they are engaged, share much in common: They try their best and display their potentials and talents fully to seek for the true meaning of life—the self-fulfillment in spite of their different personal experience and personality traits. Despite all the hardships and defeats, self-actualizing persons remain steadfast in their pursuit of happiness and realize their dreams. For them, the happiness and meaning of life lie in the accomplishment of the need for self-actualization, which is described as individual's highest need and the action that the person was born to take.

#### *B. Minor Characters' Predicament of Self-Actualization*

In the novel, Cather also depicts other minor characters' growing and developing as foil to Antonia's self-actualization. Some of them fail to gratify the basic existence needs let alone satisfy other needs on higher levels while some have achieved material success yet feel unhappy with themselves without realizing self-actualization. To some extent, the basic gratification is a sufficient condition of self-actualization, otherwise the individual's development of personality will be

limited and affected by plights of basic needs and individual growth will result in the predicament of self-actualization.

Mr. Shimerda, Antonia's father, died of loneliness and hopelessness in life. He is uprooted from his familiar and loved living environment to a strange and unfavorable wild world beyond his control and deprived of his freedom of displaying his artist talent as his living –making skill. What's more, his marriage with the demanding and greedy woman is another destructive force driving him to the tomb. His life in the new world is doomed to a total failure. Mr. Shimerda embodies that unsatisfied needs for belongingness, acceptance, esteems causes individual's despair and final collapse.

On the other hand, Cather indicates that material success does not equal to individual self-actualization.

Jim Burden, the narrator, is a legal counsel for one of the great Western railways and married the only daughter of a distinguished man. Their marriage is brilliant but by no means ideal and harmonious for the conflicts of their temperaments. Instead of staying at the comfortable house in NewYork City, Jim keeps travelling to escape from his boring and empty family life with his wife. Without mutual understanding and children, their marriage is far from satisfying and happy. His wife is a rich patron of the arts, gets engaged with a group of mediocre poets and painters contrasts sharply with the scene in the end of the novel when Antonia is surrounded by her great group of children and asks Jim how many children he has. Jim's sterility and travelling restlessness in his adulthood becomes more striking in face of Antonia's fertility, family harmony and stable security. On the other hand, Jim's account of his childhood is full of joy and happiness stands in comparison to his present reality of loss and estrangement. Lacking love, understanding and family happiness, Jim's progress and success in career brings little feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction. So, there exists one question: what leads to his marital failure? According to Maslow's discussion on individual's self-fulfillment, acceptance of self and others makes great difference in individual relatedness. It is his betrayal and denial of his real nature that blinds him to his real needs.

In his account of the past on the prairie, his affection for the prairie and these immigrant girls is obvious. He is especially attracted by the stunning and self-made Lena Lingard and dreams several times of Lena running up to him across a field "in her short skirt" and kisses him passionately. However, for his marriage, he follows suit and chooses the "match marriage" to strengthen alliances and wealth with a woman who resembles him in many aspects: having familiar education background, from the same social class, physical attractiveness. Firstly, he does not follow the true direction of his heart but attaches more importance on social standing and position. Secondly, in their marriage, he does not make efforts to accept his wife's nature but tries to escape from her. He does make choices, but never tries to take responsibility for them. To sum up, it is his denial of self-acceptance and others-acceptance leads to his failure in personal life and failure to achieve real self-actualization.

Still, there is another impressive character named Tiny Soderball in this novel sparks further thinking concerning self-

actualization. She is independent and strong enough like Antonia to build up her business and achieves “the most solid worldly success”. At first Tiny works as hired girl in a hotel in Black Hawk and then joins the gold-rush in the west experiencing the most adventurous life and makes a considerable fortune and finally settles down in San Francisco. Tiny is rich, aggressively ambitious knows how to multiply her wealth but she does not marry, has few friends nearby living a dull and lonely life in the big city. After ten years when Jim meets her again, she “was a thin, hard-faced woman, very well-dressed, very reserved in manner” who differs totally from the Tiny in Black Hawk ten years ago. The only two human beings of whom she speaks with any feeling are Johnson, who had given her his claim, and Lena, the rich dress-maker, her only friend. What’s more, she even pays little attention to her appearance as a woman as she says frankly that :

*Nothing interested her much now but making money, she was like someone in whom thee faculty of becoming interested is worn out.[1]*

She is satisfied with her success, but not elated. In terms of material, she is undoubtedly successful and gains widely admiration and attention for her adventure as a gold-hunter. However, her mind is dominated by making money; her eyes are blinded by money to anything valuable and beautiful, so it is no wonder that when Jim talks about their mutual friend Antonia, she unexpectedly sniffs at Antonia and laughs at her big family.

### III. CONCLUSION

In comparison with Antonia, neither Jim nor Tiny procures true self-fulfillment. Their successes in career fails to bring them spiritual pleasure and satisfaction without love, friendship and harmonious family. Happiness seems rare to them in spite of their material success. Cather implies that individual’s self-actualization involves different successes and fulfillments in personal and social aspects without which individual still feels unhappy and unsatisfied thus resulting in the plight of self-actualization. Unlike those who gain worldly successes, Antonia indeed harvests kinds of fruits of life including

material and spiritual satisfaction through relatively proper gratifications of needs in different levels.

As revealed in the analysis of *My Antonia* from the angle of Maslow Needs Hierarchy theory, Cather’s views on individual growth and development are clearly embodied through the depiction of characters. Cather holds a positively rationalistic outlook on world, life and human beings. She believes that only through endless efforts and struggles with life can a person fulfill his different degrees of needs and live his life fully and meaningfully. The study of growth and development of Cather’s protagonists gives a significant inspiration to people in modern society who confront a series of crises and troubles practically and philologically concerning self, others and nature. Furthermore, it will give further enlightenment on modern people who are sometimes confused with what to do and what to follow.

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