

Strive More and Suffer Less

—A Critical Comparison between Edna Pontellier and Antonia

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Abstract—This thesis probes into the struggles of the two awakening women in *My Antonia* and *The Awakening* by applying the theory of Maslow's Needs. Through a critical comparison, a distinctive vision is clear. The analysis of the individual suffering and struggles in these two novels from the perspective of the psychological motivation theory aims to gain a general picture of sound personality development. It sparks inspiration and reflection on the true awakenings in modern society in which human beings are confronted with so many crises both practically and spiritually. Life seems abstract, absurd even confusing sometimes and men need explanations, answers or directions to get a better knowledge of them and to make proper choice and to face frustrations. Psychological theory gives a scientific and reasonable angle of view to think over and to face one's needs, developments and crisis as well.

Keywords—*My Antonia; The Awakening; Happiness; Critical Comparison*

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the greatest American novelists in the early 20th century, Willa Cather (1873-1947) has exerted profound influence on literature for her affectionate writings of the pioneers' lives in America West. Among her works, *My Antonia*, *The Song of the Lark* and *O Pioneers!* are known as the famous pioneer trilogy, which applauds the diligence and determination the pioneers display through their struggles with the wild land. Her works are mainly accepted and reviewed as feminist writing due to her unconventional views embodied in her heroines. Another American novelist Kate Chopin describes the "awakening" woman Pontellier in *The Awakening*, presenting the awakening course of Pontellier. Antonia and Pontellier live in a man-controlled society, both of them are eager to pursue their fulfillments and happiness. This thesis probes into the two women's pursuits of self-values and happiness from a critical comparison from the social psychologist perspective. Thesis argues that happiness of the individual lies heavily with a rational pursuit of gratification in modern times.

American novelist Willa Cather portrays a pioneer woman Antonia in *My Antonia* embodying the courses of brave women's growth. Pioneer women become tough in rough reality. Another American novelist Kate Chopin describes the "awakening" woman Pontellier in *The Awakening*, presenting the awakening course of Pontellier. Antonia and Pontellier live in a man-controlled society, both of them are eager to pursue

their fulfillments and happiness. However, they choose different ways for achieving their ideal life statuses. For Antonia, her way is full of hardships, frustrations, challenges; as for Pontellier, she encounters passion, dull marriage, disillusion. Antonia fights hard and desperately elbowing all obstacles aside and realizes a fruitful life while Pontellier gives herself into seemingly ideal passionate unions with other men and becomes prey of misunderstanding of independence and freedom getting confused and feeling at a loss.

Researches on Cather's works are wide and profound both at home and abroad. Critics and readers pay much attention to various aspects of her works, involving mainly her writing style, narrative techniques, characterization and identity construction. Though the critics and readers accept and appreciate Cather's works from various perspectives concerning different themes, Willa Cather's works have an essential feature: initiation and self-actualization. A novel as rich as *My Antonia*, can be read many times from different perspectives. The theme of individual growth and self-actualization in *My Antonia* has also aroused much attention but it has been discussed mainly from the feminist perspective. A review of the previous researches shows that there are not any particular essays that have discussed this novel from the perspective of Maslow's Need hierarchy Theory. Therefore this research will concentrate on the theme of initiation and self-actualization in view of Maslow's Need Hierarchy theory to investigate the individual growth and self-fulfillment in *My Antonia* and probes into factors contributing to individual's sound mind and growth.

Normally, individual pursuit for happiness is interwoven with a person's growth. Growth is a course of needs-meeting. According to Abraham Maslow, all humans had universal needs. He said that "these needs fall into five categories: physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualization, which is conceived as a pyramid." [5] self-actualization is the motive to realize all of one's potentialities. Clayton Aderfer reworked Maslow's needs hierarchy to align it more closely with empirical observations. Clayton Aderfer classified them as "existence, relatedness and growth" [5]. Existence refers to our concern with basic material existence requirements, such as physiological and safety need; relatedness refers to the desire we have for maintaining interpersonal relationships, such as social/ love need; growth refers to an intrinsic desire for personal development or self-actualization. Both of the two heroines are making efforts to realize their ideal living values, while set

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their feet onto different roads. This paper analyzes Antonia and Pontellier's struggles in the three levels mentioned above. By comparison, either their success or tragedy will give us deeper insight into individual's growth.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A. Analysis of Antonia

American social psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970), the main originator of humanistic psychology, is acknowledged as the father of Humanistic Psychology and the spiritual leader of the humanistic psychology movement. In his theories, Maslow stresses lifelong learning, self-growth and self-actualization. He puts forward and demonstrates systematically need hierarchy theory firstly in his representative work *Motivation and Personality* in 1943, which is a model comprised of five levels of need including physiological need, safety need, love need, the esteem need and self-actualization need. In his theory, human beings' motivations are named as needs. The theory of Need hierarchy and that of self-actualization turn out to be his major contribution to the psychological field and the core of the humanistic psychology. Since he published his conceptualization of his theory, it has become one of the most popular and often cited theories of human motivation.

According to Maslow's Theory of needs, existence needs include all forms of material and physiological desires, including not only hunger and thirst needs, but also the physical working conditions that provide the means to satisfy those needs. This is the most basic and necessary needs every person must face and try his or her best to satisfy.

In *My Antonia*, the land in the west is raw and poor, serves as the initial force to be faced. In the immigrants' opinion, America was a heaven full of treasure, but the reality was on the contrary. Bad weather and living conditions were common and not the most difficult challenge. Many people might worked hard for a whole year but gain almost nothing. Many of them flee soon. Some couldn't bear the pains of failure and disappointment and committed suicide, such as Antonia's father. Only those with strong will and determination can become the owner of the land and satisfy the basic needs through surprisingly hard work. Young Antonia doesn't flee her responsibility for her family after father's death, in order to support the family, she becomes the main labor in the family, getting smarter than the men and even stronger not only in body but also in her mentality during the process of conquering the wild land. She has to do the job that usually belongs to the men. She never complains and gives in; she just works and tries hard. Under such harsh reality, the differences of sex are obscured. Antonia grows coarse and muscular, losing the female's grace and softness during the endless hard working. However, she is proud of her strength and muscles and often talks to Jim about how much she can lift and endure. Even she almost has no time to play and relax, "Antonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached." [4] she still seems happy and optimistic. She does not feel ashamed of her sun-darkened skin and losing grace. She is happy and proud that she could work like a man and support the family. Jim Burdum's grandfather once praises, "she will help some fellow get ahead

in the world." [4] Antonia works on the land and belongs to it. Even her tragedy happened, she is not defeated, she could gain comfort and force from labor and land. "I belong on a farm... I am never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here, and I don't mind work a bit, if I don't have to put up with sadness." [4]. With the land, she can recover from the tragedy and regain courage and realize her dream. "I'd always be miserable in a city, I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here." If she left the land, she would feel restless, aimless and helpless. Land is her home and her source of courage and determination. Her dream is growing with the crops in the soil.

B. Analysis of Edna Pontellier

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier seems luckier than Antonia, she has a decent family, she has no concerns with existence needs. Except doing the housework sometimes, she has nothing to do with labor at all. Compared with Antonia, Edna is beautiful, charming, and fashionable; she can enjoy the rich living condition and the leisure pace of family life. As for Edna, she needn't fight and struggle for living. However, Edna seems not satisfied with what she owns. She is not happy. Edna is about 30 and has two kids. As a mother and a wife, she has to sacrifice something for her role in the family. But she does not play her role well, failing to take her responsibilities in the family. She cannot gain happiness from her family, because she doesn't care them at all. In terms of family, once married and establish her own family, the couple is supposed to shoulder the family duties and to be responsible for the family. The family's happiness is gained from the wife and husband's efforts, which is the everlasting tradition both in western and oriental cultures. No efforts no happiness. In this sense, she is not as happy as Antonia. Edna fades and withers away out of the lack of comfort and energy from family. She seems dependent and inferior to husband while Antonia is the breadwinner and becomes a symbol of battered and undiminished human value.

III. COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TWO

A. Marriage and Relatedness

Edna belongs to a conventional family having a good husband and some children, and she is lucky, her husband loves her while she is not sure her love for him. However, she doesn't pay enough attention to her family and her marriage. Under the husband's protection, she becomes lazy and blank inside, in her eyes' her marriage is dull and depressed. Why does Edna has no interests in her family and pays no attention to her husband and her children? This kind of coldness is due to her long-dreamed romantic story, a French fairy tales. "How many years have I slept?" she inquired. The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics. How many ages ago did Madame Antoine and Tonie die? And when did our people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth?" [4] these lines she speaks in Chapter XIII implies that she compares her affairs with the fairy tales that she desires to be isolated with Robert and thus free from the restrictions of the society that surrounds

them, her fantasy that she and Robert have already been left alone as “past relics” proofs her childishness and unrealistic romantic spiritual status. Moreover, she moves to the “pigeon-house” to find a spiritual and material space catering for her dream and her lover, which reflects her misunderstanding of the women liberation movement. Her long-cherished freedom and romance just a kind of vet for her blankness. Her marriage is a failure which brings no happiness to her and to the families; her affairs with other men are other failures which are doomed and meaningless.

Antonia’s love for Larry Donovan is a tragedy for her. She is full of hope that she would get married with him and happily makes preparations for her wedding. At last, she was abandoned alone and pregnant. Through Jim’s eyes, we see she is not defeated and doesn’t complain about her fate she devotes herself into the work and quickly get out of the sadness. She loves her baby never hides the baby from the public. She behaves bravely and vigorously. She is different from these most traditional women. It is her strong will and independent spirit that survive her. Form the end of the novel, Antonia eventually finds her true love. Her husband her children deserve her pride. After so much desertion and hardship, she is tougher and surer about her future. She is content with her present living and everything is under control. Antonia’s whole life is toward the founding of a family. her marriage with Anton meant to be the instrument of her fulfillment.

She is a battered woman and not young any more. From her, we the utmost charm of the female “ she still had that something which fires the imagination, could 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 as last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, which had been so tireless in serving generous emotion.” [4]

Antonia wins both in her marriage and love with all her virtues and large-mindedness, she earns people’s respect for devoting her life to the land and for supporting the family; while Edna fails to gain happiness either from her marriage or her love affairs due to her childish dream of passionate romance and her lack of responsibility.

B. Growth and Independence

According to Maslow, growth and development are people’s highest needs. People seek to grow, be creative for themselves and for their environment. When they are successfully growing, they feel a sense of wholeness, achievement and fulfillment. Fulfillment means “the desire to develop one’s true potential as an individual to the fullest extent and to express one’s skills, talents and emotions in a manner that is personally fulfilling.” [8]

From Maslow’s words, the self-actualizing people live more in the real world of nature than in the man-made concepts or wishes. Secondly, these people accept self, others and nature well. They can accept their own human nature despite the shortcomings and discrepancies form the ideal image without feeling anxious. It does not mean they are self-satisfied. They

just treat with sins, weaknesses and evils in the same spirit with which one accepts the characteristics of nature. According to Maslow’s demonstration in Chapter11 of his *Motivation and Personality*, those self-actualizing individuals share some most useful and outstanding characteristics in common. Firstly, these people possess more efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it.

Antonia, as a pioneer woman, has to overcome tremendous hardships of the wild. She never loses heart or hope, not even in the first book of the novel in which the harsh reality of the prairie deprives her beloved father. She works and lives with an innate dignity which springs from her intuitive knowledge of her appointed function in the continuation of the species. She is sure that knowledge is important; farming needs not only strength but also wisdom. She is bright, sensitive and quick to learn. She learns English from Jim Burden so that she could help her family communicate with other people. She is eager to know to everything about farming. She begs Jim to tell her all the nice things he learns at the school. “ 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 have been able to bring my children up so much better, I’m glade I had a chance to learn ” [4] . As a peasant, She lives and learns. When she is old, all her children deserve her pride, she grows experienced like the goodness of the land!

Edna is unaware of her own feelings and ambitions at first in the comfortable family. The people she meets and the experiences she has on Grand Isle awaken desires and urges for music, sexual satisfaction, are, and freedom that she can no longer bear to keep hidden. She begins to see the world around her from a fresh perspective, paying little attention to thee behavior expected of her and ignoring the effects of her unconventional actions. What she did seemed shameful and selfish, she goes to another extreme. Her decision to commit suicide at the end of the novel can be considered as a kind of rebellion, a refusal to sacrifice her integrity. Her wakening is full of troubles and blinding. She is both childish and childlike when she faces the conventional world, so she is doomed to be defeated. Her tragedy partly lies in her selfishness, her childish romanticism and her blind following of the then social trends.

IV. CONCLUSION

These pioneer women such as Antonia are rare in the twentieth century, especially in the cultures usually controlled by men. Women in traditional novels are generally weak, timid, and mindless. Through Antonia, we see women’s courage and will come from their independence and faith, which work as lasting motive force in one’s life. Women can share the sphere as men. The wakening woman Edna sets her feet onto a fresh world which is different totally from her family and begins a journey with an obscure destination. She gains enough courage but with little faith and responsibility. The place where she stands is not hard and stable; her way leads to her disillusion. Her motivation together with her choices is doomed. The alienation of happiness and frustrations of growth of human beings are mostly caused by individual’s confusion about selfness and otherness. Without a clear direction and rational knowledge about himself and the environment, one may go to the opposite direction far from their cherished happiness.

Moreover, getting used to our blessings is another important root of human evil, tragedy and suffering. If we can count our blessings as self-actualizing people do and maintain their constant sense of gratitude for it, life could be vastly changed and improved.

To sum up, the greatest inspiration we may draw from the comparison between *My Antonia* and *The Awakening* with Maslow's needs hierarchy theory is that modern people must be aware of their rational needs psychologically and physiologically and redeem themselves morally and spiritually so as to gain the true happiness.

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