

Self-Fulfillment Element of Pioneer Women in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*

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This paper emphasizes pioneer women's fulfillment of the self in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1994) authored by Willa Cather, a foremost American novelist in history of the 20th century American literature. The novels *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* mainly describe the life and struggle of immigrant pioneers, especially the women pioneers in the West of the 19th century. The heroines of the two novels, Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda, are both outstanding representatives of the pioneering age. Being almost a perfect character without weakness, Alexandra, the heroine of *O Pioneers!*, is not afraid of hardships and always right in her decisions and views on things. She successfully manages her family from the beginning to the end. Antonia, who is more human and lifelike than Alexandra because of her weakness, stands the tests of frustrations in life and becomes a mature, indomitable pioneer. Through hardship, Willa Cather's protagonists have some common places that lead to their success. Pioneer women transform their environment with their outstanding traits. Pioneer women's struggling for more rights and trying to achieve self-fulfillment encourage one generation after another.

Keywords: Willa Cather, pioneer women, self-fulfillment

Introduction

Willa Cather is a very productive writer who has published 12 novels. And undoubtedly, among her novels those with the background of Nebraska prairies and the character of immigrant pioneers are the most impressive ones. By these pioneer novels, Cather brought people back to the pioneering times of the immigrants from the Old World to American Midwest after the 1860s and 1870s with the exaltation of pioneering spirits and pioneering women.

By reading Cather's works, we can find that the pioneering age in her writing is mostly expressed in her two major novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1994), in which the female characters are impressively portrayed. The novels *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* mainly describe the life and struggle of immigrant pioneers, especially the women pioneers in the West of the 19th century. The heroines of the two novels, Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda, are both outstanding representatives of the pioneering age. Being almost a perfect character without weakness, Alexandra, the heroine of *O Pioneers!*, is not afraid of hardships and always right in her decisions and views on things. She successfully manages her family from the beginning to the end.

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Antonia, who is more human and lifelike than Alexandra because of her weakness, stands the tests of frustrations in life and becomes a mature, indomitable pioneer. Both of the two pioneer novels are famous and sold well, the reason lies in the fact that Cather began to use her own materials and therefore created her own style. However, the structure of both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* has troubled a good many readers. The loose organization, gaps, and digressions made them seem flawed works. In Cather's "pioneer" novels, plot is probably the least important part. But readers can find that her novels have the power to stir their emotions, stimulate their imaginations and the characters are of flesh and blood, and after they close the book those images still linger in their memory.

The Realization of Identity-Searching

Pioneer women have to overcome tremendous hardships of the nature. Not until they undergo extraordinary hardship and pain could they reach the highest level—self-actualization. Alexandra has struggled for many hard years to tame and cultivate the virgin prairie land. She experiences the father's death, the burden of the whole family, Carl's departure, and the pressure of her brothers. All these wounds do not make her leave the land. She says that the right thing is usually just what everybody does not do. The next 12 years she sees the mother's death, the brothers' marriages and demanding a division of the estate. Alexandra still loves and respects life. Alexandra's only human tie is her deep maternal feeling for Emil whom she is sending to college. She decides to buy a piano to Lou's daughter, Milly, she is concerned about the children's development. She has endured everything patiently and tries to help others. Alexandra triumphs over the intractable prairie amassing a fortune and stabilizing the future for her three brothers. She proves herself a capable woman.

Antonia Shimerda is not like Alexandra, a material success by the standards of her era. Experiencing vicissitudes of life, Antonia settles down on the farm, marries poor Bohemian Anton Cuzak and breeds a brood of children. Antonia's return to the land is a rebellion against the materialistic society. Despite the difficulties that Antonia faces, she apparently has found what she needs for fulfillment at the end of novel. Some critics have called Antonia "an earth goddess... she is a re-creation of an archetypal pattern—women as the embodiment of self-assured if not self-contained physical fertility which insures the endurance of the race" (Miller, 1985, p. 55). Antonia never despairs, not even in the first book of the novel in which the hostility of the first prairie winter deprives her of 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. Even in the second book, called "The Hired Girls", Antonia feels no sense of an enforced inferiority but rather a supreme reliance on the hidden resources bestowed upon her by the hard physical struggles of her past. "An unselfish nature allows her to undergo years of drudgery and still affirm an enduring passion for life and motherhood" (Reynold, 1996, p. 64). Cather later stated that she saw Antonia as "the embodiment of all her feelings about the early immigrants on the prairie. The novel thus intertwines nostalgia for the history of the American West with the harsh realities of pioneer life" (Reynold, 1999, p. 39). At the end of the novel, Antonia and her children are a vivid embodiment of the fulfillment of humanity, healthy persons in spirit. The virtues of passion, understanding friendship, trust, sincerity tie them tightly. And it is Antonia's passion that creates this. She encourages her husband and toils with him on the land during the hard time. She educates her children well in manner, behavior, especially in mind. Antonia passes the old virtues and American civilization down to her children.

The change of women's social status lies in the women themselves. They must work hard to get more rights and respect from others. Both the two remain the pioneer virtues in poverty and hardship. They are "triumphant products of the pioneering era: in them the mystical essence of a heroic age, now unfortunately passing, is embodied" (Miller, 1985, p. 55). Like her pioneers, Willa Cather has conquered difficulty too. In her society it is difficult to be a writer and achieve success professionally. There are not many women writers who could be successful in writing. Women must fight with the society but also against the man's obstacle. Cather has made herself powerful as a writer; her books are accepted; she has financial ease. She, too, has been a pioneer and now she has her success. Through hardships, pioneer women make a permanent mark on the land with their crops and the creation of their own property. They come to know self and build up confidence.

The Realization of Spiritual Purgation

Despite the many hardships they must face, pioneer women remain dedicated to their family and to improving their life. They are trusting and loyal to their families and friends. They know what they want in life and are determined to reach their goals of success. Labor vocational knowledge makes them more powerful and independent. They are more suited to be the wives of the men in the west, for they are strong and energetic. Most important of all, they willingly take responsibility for their families. As a result, pioneer women could be accepted by the society.

In the two novels, both Alexandra and Antonia sacrifice themselves when their families are in trouble. They display extraordinary courage and wisdom. They do not just regard themselves as women but also as men. They both bear the burden of the family and do not mind losing the elegance of ladies. They sacrifice their best youth for the development of the family and the farm. When their fathers die, they could have depended on their brothers, for the society should have been controlled by men. However, they do not step back and watch. They bravely bear the responsibility. They do not complain about their miserable life. It is this characteristic that makes the man around them respect them. The land is tamed and productive; it is being re-parceled by a new generation.

Alexandra has always been the help to the family. Both of her two brothers depend on her wisdom. Lou is relatively intelligent, but he is also devious, narrow-minded, and vicious. Oscar is a hard worker, but mentally sluggish and uncreative. They resent Alexandra for her success and her relationship with Carl, but they could achieve nothing without Alexandra. Emil reaps the advantages of Alexandra's financial success: Free from the obligations of farm work, he is able to go to college and explore the world. Therefore, Carl admires Alexandra and says, "I've been thinking how strangely things work out. I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own" (Cather, 1913, p. 194).

When Carl returns, he is astonished at Alexandra's success. He has run away from the land and still gains nothing in the town. Carl is withdrawn, gloomy, pensive man, self-conscious, and sensitive. He feels deeply ashamed in front of Alexandra.

In direct contrast to Jim Burden's sense of loss and disappointment in life, Antonia's energy, joy, and courage pervade the novel. In the climactic scene when Jim visits her, he finds that unlike so many of the pioneers before her, Antonia has not lost the hope of life. She is finally to Jim, and to the reader, a heroic figure in American history. She is the apotheosis of the pioneer woman, one who "lent herself to immemorial human

attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true" (Cather, 1994, p. 926). Jim Burden is Antonia's close friend. When he hears of her misfortune, he is afraid of meeting her. However, to his surprise, Antonia is full of energy and hope. For Jim, Antonia becomes symbolic of the undeviating cyclic nature of all life. Antonia is

...the insistent reminder that it is the tragic nature of time to bring life to fruition through hardship and struggle only to precipitate the decline and, ultimately, death, but not without first making significant provision for new life to follow, flower and fall. (Miller, 1985, p. 52)

Antonia's vital leadership in her relationship to her husband gives eloquent proof to her transcendence of the boundaries generally drawn for women. Of this phenomenon, The Frontier Experience and the American Dream provides a rational interpretation, "The archetypal action of establishing, consecrating a home directs human energies and intelligence toward cooperative and corporate actions... Necessity frequently demands that men learn patience and caring, introspection and self-sacrifice; women solitude and independence, individuality and leadership" (Busby, 1989, p. 36). At Willa Cather's time, it was uncommon for pastorals to be written centralizing on women having influence and sometimes control over men as is the case in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. Willa Cather stresses her own belief in an individual integrity and personal fulfillment. Pioneer women are the ones who take responsibility. They have played a role as important as the man has. Willa Cather's protagonists are larger than life and stronger than the men around them are; her male characters seem to be weak and ineffectual in contrast. The strong, pure, passionate, and virtuous women are opposed to the weak, potentially generous, but ineffective and ultimately shallow man. At the bottom of her heart, Willa Cather thinks that woman could be equal to man on all sides.

The Achievement in Self-Growth

Growth needs is at the highest level. At this level, 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. Cultures around the world have regarded self-fulfillment as the ultimate goal of human striving and as the fundamental test of the goodness of a human life. In the two novels, Willa Cather's pioneer women all have experienced the lower levels of needs and eventually reach at the final level of psychological development. Most of the protagonists are immigrants from Europe. They bring Europe's traditional concepts and precious culture to the Wild West. All her protagonists change a lot because of the hard life. They are not only strong women but also the pioneer women in the construction of the culture. Pioneer women have more control over their private life and social authority. They are just common women, but they have become the creators of the history. The protagonists endure all the pain under the hard situation, and devote all their life to the land. They win people's respect by supporting their families. The most important of all, they have a clear idea about the importance of knowledge and try to put theory into practice. At the same time, they achieve self-fulfillment.

As the very characteristic of pioneer women is their self-fulfillment, they pursue their bright future for the sake of their abilities to be recognized by the people and the society. They are just like the strong women in modern society. They would not confine themselves in the strain of families. They clearly know what they want and how they could get it. They make their efforts to achieve their goals. They are wise, strong, brave, and self-confident, which are derived from their eagerness for knowledge.

Alexandra knows she could not rely on her two brothers who are timid. She has her own novel viewpoints. She needs the *Bible* and newspaper to get the information she needs. Her older brothers work hard but have neither the initiative nor the perseverance to continue alone. Alexandra is more eager to learn about the land than both of them and even Alexandra's father firmly believes that she is the only one in the family having the talent and ability to grasp the land. She carefully looks into the land. She is sure that knowledge is important. Farming needs not only strength but also wisdom. She talks with the Crazy and drives to the river to consult river countries are no more prosperous than the highlands. Besides, she would analyze the information about the land. Because of her knowledge, she is sure it is time to buy more land at a cheap price though many people have lost confidence in the land. She knows that the people who become rich are the men in town who are buying up other people's land but do not try to farm it. They are not the men to watch, in a new country. "Let's try to do like the shrewd ones, and not like these stupid fellows. I don't want you boys always to have to work like this. I want you to be independent and Emil to go to school" (Cather, 1913, p. 172). Alexandra calculates how much land they must buy and how much money they could earn after 20 years. Her purpose is that, "But as sure as we are sitting here to-night, we can sit down to-night, we can sit down here ten years from now independent landowners, not struggling farmers any longer" (Cather, 1913, p. 171). She is determined in her decision. She knows for sure that she is right. Even after she succeeds, she would still consult people's ideas. We could also see it from her long-time aim to send her little brother to college. She thinks that only those who grasp the knowledge could succeed. So she always reads. During the weekday, she reads only the newspaper, but on Sunday, and in the long evenings of winter, she reads a good deal: read a few things over a great many times. She knows long portions of the "Frithjof of Saga" by heart, and like most Swedes who read at all, she was fond of Longfellow's verse—the ballads and the "Golden Legend" and the Spanish student (Cather, 1913, p. 167).

At the second part of the novel, we see that Alexandra does not talk much at the table, but she encourages her men to talk, and she always listens attentively, even when they seem to be talking foolishly. Alexandra not only learns knowledge from the newspaper and *Bible* but also makes full use of other people's wisdom. After so many years' hardship, Alexandra also learns lessons from the mistake. For example, when Lou and she have different notions about feeding stock, she said,

Well, the only way we can find out is to try... and that's a good thing. It's bad if all the members of a family think alike. They never get anywhere. Lou can learn by my mistakes and I can learn by his... (Cather, 1913, p. 181)

She knows clearly where to get what she needs. Alexandra is democratic in the family. She never takes pride on her achievements, but is ready to accept other people's ideas. On the other hand, she would think over other people's opinions and make up her own mind. When people are talking about the madness of Ivar and sending him to the asylum, she comforts Ivar and says,

...other people have nothing to do with either you or me. So long as I am suited with you, there is nothing to be said... There is a great deal in what you say. Let people go on talking as they like, and we will go on living as we think best. (Cather, 1913, p. 183)

Alexandra talks to the men about their crops and to the women about their poultry. In this way, she learns a great deal. Alexandra is not merely a forward-thinking, but also occupies the rather unusual position of a woman farmer in an overwhelmingly male-dominated rural society. Because of this characteristic, she is naturally a

conspicuous local figure, made more so by her forward-thinking adaptive approach to the business of farming.

Antonia is bright, sensitive, eager, and quick to learn. She learns English from Jim Burden so that she could help her family communicate with other people. She is anxious to know everything about farming. Concerning her education, she could accept her fate, "I ain't got time to learn", she says when he informs her of the beginning a new school term, "School is... for little boys" (Cather, 1994, p. 792). But the knowledge that her father would have been hurt by such an answer brings tears to her eyes. She begs Jim to tell all the nice things he learns at the school. When her English improves, she always asks Jim Burden many questions about what men are doing in the field. She even thinks that the elders withhold helpful information and try to get valuable secrets from Jim Burden. She would ask craftily when his grandfather expects to begin planting corn. She knows that skill is needed in farming and she could not just be working hard. She learns how to keep the house from Jim's grandmother. Her experience as a hired girl adapts her to future family life. When Jim is sorry that Antonia suffers a lot in the town and ought never to have gone there, she says eagerly,

Oh, I'm glad I went! I'd never have known anything about cooking or house-keeping 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. (Cather, 1994, p. 921)

Antonia is clear that everything has two sides. She does not regret the mistakes she has made because she could learn lessons from her failure.

In Cather's works, her protagonists all respect knowledge and are interested in the things around them, which make them different from the other people and could achieve unusual achievements.

Conclusion

In Cather's works, her protagonists all respect knowledge and are interested in the things around them, which make them different from the other people and could achieve unusual achievements. Through hardship, Willa Cather's protagonists have some common places that lead to their success. Pioneer women transform their environment with their outstanding traits. Pioneer women's struggling for more rights and trying to achieve self-fulfillment encourage one generation after another.

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