

# Antonia's Growth and Self-Realization— An Ecofeminist Interpretation of *My Antonia*

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## Abstract

*My Antonia* is one of the masterpieces of the famous American female writer Willa Cather. This novel, depicting the real life of pioneers in the Midwestern frontier region of the United States, shows the alienation of human beings from nature and the oppression of women under the patriarchal society. Based on the perspective of ecofeminism, the paper will sort out the different stages of the heroine-Antonia's "self-realization" and explore the reasons for the heroine's growth.

## Keywords

Antonia, Self-realization, Ecofeminist.

## 1. Introduction

*My Antonia*, written in 1918, is one of the most influential pinnacles of Cather's creative career. It is a frontier romance from a woman's point of view, brave enough to break with convention and extremely rich in eco-feminist connotations. It mainly tells the story of a group of European immigrants who worked hard and bravely to establish a pioneering journey, highlighting a female pioneer with extraordinary strength, who constantly pursues to grow herself, perfect herself and finally realize herself, and build her own harmonious home through her hardworking hands, shaping the image of an earth goddess full of energy. The heroine of the novel is a new era woman who is not afraid of difficulties and has strong endurance and an independent personality. Since the publication of the novel, many scholars have interpreted the work from different perspectives, such as romantic criticism, narrative studies and feminist criticism. With the development of literary criticism and industrial civilization, the protection of the ecological environment has become a serious problem and a hot topic in today's society. Thus, this paper will analyze the transformation of the heroine's image under the heavy oppression of the male-dominated society from the perspective of ecofeminism. The purpose of the study is to sort out the process of the heroine's growth and self-realization and explore the reasons for the success of the heroine's identity construction.

## 2. Patriarchal Oppression—Self-loss

According to ecofeminist theory, patriarchal societies are the source of oppression of women and nature. In a patriarchal culture, women and nature are the same; they are passive, inferior, and irrational; while men are rational and active. "The patriarchal culture regards the different biological mechanisms of males and females as the foundation to oppress females and nature" (Zuo Jingping 46).

### 2.1. Women as virtuous housewives and servants

In the era which Antonia lived in, it was a patriarchal society and women were dominated and oppressed. As the object of men's sexual desire and the virtuous housewife, women had little social status and were in a state of subordination, so they were often excluded and in a state of inferiority, they lost the status of value that they should have as human beings. "The systematic

domination of women by men through institutions, behaviors and ways of thinking, which assign higher value, privilege and power to men than women" (Warren 64).

The representative housewives who conform to the social criterion of virtue are Mrs. Burden and Mrs. Harling. "Mrs. Burden, Jim's grandmother, performs well her duties of being a good housewife" (Zhou Menghua 18). Jim's grandmother, Mrs. Burden, is a typical example of the patriarchal society. She is "exceedingly desirous that everything should go with due order and decorum" (Cather 39), with all her ingenious ideas and hardworking hands. She would use her deft hands to provide delicious food for her family, while not forgetting to keep the house in order. "She baked either pies or cake for us every day, unless, for a change, she made my favorite pudding, striped with currants and boiled in a bag" (Cather 77). She gives all her time and energy to her family, without thinking herself. Another representative character is Mrs. Harling. She is also a typical virtuous housewife. She is responsible for running the household. She was responsible for running the household and she had never complained about the heavy pressure. In the decision of different affairs, she was like a servant, following fully the will of her husband. "Mrs. Harling completely loses herself in front of her husband, functioning only as the server" (Zhou Menghua 20).

## 2.2. Ambrosch's oppression over Antonia

The typical characters of men in the patriarchal system are mainly represented by Antonia's brother Ambrosch as well as Antonia's boss—Mr. Harling. They are considered to be the dominant one in production and social activities in the traditional concept of the time. That is, the men are the backbone of the family, the one who provide for the family, and also the decision makers in important family matters.

As a teenager, Antonia lived happily and comfortably in the care of her father. From a young age, she was in awe of her father and obeyed his words, never doing anything against his wishes. However, migration to Nebraska was unbearably hard, which led Antonia's father to find relief from the burden of life by committing suicide. Unable to accept this change, her mother was also devastated. Since then, Antonia's brother Ambrosch, the oldest male child in the family, has become the master of the family and has a high position in the family. "He is the representative of the patriarchy, and his goal is to tame the land" (Liu Song 77). "Although he is not an agreeable and respectable person, he is the big apple in their mother's eyes" (Zuo Jingping 11). He is a person who "often surly with his mother and sister and contemptuous toward his father" (Cather 17). He saw Antonia as his tool to provide for the family and let her do heavy work a girl should not bear. Antonia, like a man, "goes from farm to farm, binding sheaves or working with the threshers" (Cather 95).

Antonia suffers everything in silence. Not only is she obligated to help her mother with the household chores, but she is also asked by her brother to do all the work. Her brother Ambrosch did not treat Antonia as a sister or a girl, but kept forcing Antonia to do tasks that should not belong to a girl and making all kinds of unfair accusations. This is seen by all the servants on the farm, and it is what causes the people on the farm to often make yellow jokes about her. "Every cent of his sister's wages should be paid to him each month, and he will provide her with such clothing as he thought necessary" (Cather 105). Little Antonia, who was always submissive and in awe of her brother, "wore the boots her father had thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. Her outgrown cotton dress switched around her calves, over the boot-tops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throats were burned up as brown as a sailor" (Cather 73).

Antonia gave a lot to her family, never grumbled about her job, no matter how difficult or exhausting it was, and always did what Ambrosch desired. Despite this, Ambrosch never showed her any compassion. Instead, he concentrated on how he might profit more from Antonia's hard work and sweat. He has no compassion for women and is bent on controlling Antonia and using

his sister as a tool that will make money. These acts of oppression against Antonia are shown in the novel to the fullest extent.

### 2.3. Mr. Harling's oppression over Antonia

Another male representative with the oppression against Antonia is Mr. Haring, an authoritarian and egotistical man, who "seemed to me autocratic and imperial in his ways. He walked, talked, put on his gloves, shook hands, like a man who felt that he had power" (Cather 128). According to Liu Song, "the more successful he is, the more he takes from nature" (Liu Song 78). As an entrepreneur and representative of the middle class, he constantly shifted his family responsibilities to his wife to be able to pursue his career. Antonia began working at the age of 17 at the home of Mr. Harling in Blackhawk. "Antonia has sacrificed herself in order to cater to every one of the Harling's" (Wang Ping 53).

Because of her background at the time, Antonia was completely subservient to her violent and conceited employer, Mr. Harling. She could not escape from the oppression and tyranny of her boss, "fairly panting with eagerness to please him" (Cather 144). "Obviously, the Harling's is a small kingdom in which Mr. Harling is undoubtedly the king and everyone should submit to him, especially Antonia, who is just a servant or a slave" (Wang Ping 53). Mr. Harling ordered Antonia to stay away from the night dances. Because he considered "all hired girls who are dancing with men in the tent are unscrupulous and misbehaved" (Zuo Jingping 13). Otherwise, Antonia would have faced the loss of the job.

Living in the age of paternity, Antonia is suppressed by her brother and her boss. Meanwhile, Antonia fails to gain the positive influence and the power of awakening from contemporary women due to other women's low position. That is why Antonia gets the power from nature.

## 3. Returning to Nature—Self-construction

Antonia experienced many misfortunes in her early life, such as her father's suicide, her brother's exploitation and her lover's abandonment. However, it was nature that comforted and embraced her like a mother, endowing her with characteristics such as hard work, tolerance and gratitude.

### 3.1. Little Antonia's intimacy with land and animals

Little Antonia's eyes were big and full of enthusiasm, "especially shining, like the sun shining on two brown ponds in the woods" (Cather 8). In the wheat field, "The two girls were lighthearted and never complained. They were always ready to forget their troubles at home, and to run away with me over the prairie, scaring rabbits or standing up flocks of quail" (Cather 23). As a young girl, Antonia was not only passionate and compassionate about small animals, but also understanding. She loved nature as much as crops and trees could not grow without soil. She loved plants from the bottom of her heart, just as she once expressed her feelings. "I love them as if they were people... We often carry water after a long day's work in the fields... But in times of drought, I have to worry about the trees even when I am tired. They are like children in my heart" (Cather 213).

When Antonia and Jim were playing in the prairie and found a small injured pale green insect, she made a warm nest for the little insect with her own hands, speaking gentle words while gently caressing it. Little Antonia's various embodiments in the novel highlight her love-obsessed relationship with nature.

Land gives Antonia power, energy, contentment and reassurance. "Antonia, the pioneering heroine of Cather, is hardworking and devoted to the land. She loves it and takes it to be an equal partner. Land supports her with surviving substance and spiritual shelter" (Zuo Jingping 30).

### 3.2. Antonia's identification with nature as mother

"Nature heals her and makes her realize that she should root in this land" (Zuo Jingping 30). She has now graciously admitted, in response to Jim's question, that "I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of loneliness. I like to be where I know every track and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here" (Cather 218). "In Antonia's eyes, those creatures are not inferior and cannot be exploited at human's will any more. They are the same as human beings in the large ecosystem—earth" (Zuo Jingping 32). "The front yard was enclosed by a thorny locust hedge, and at the gate grew two silvery, mother like trees of the mimosa family" (Cather 231).

Last, "Antonia is described as the earth mother, Gaia, vigorous and generous" (Zuo Jingping 32). "For Antonia, nature was not only a challenge to her will and a vehicle for her dreams, but also a spiritual home for her sense of spirituality, imagination, happiness and refuge" (Gao Lili, Yang Zhihong 122). Harmony with nature, self-identification with the earth, a strong belief in happiness and hard work makes Antonia an earth goddess.

Gaia, the ancient Mother Earth, created the world and humanity from the beginning of chaos. Ecofeminism reimagines the earth goddess as its symbol. Antonia is the quintessential earth goddess, not confined to the traditional roles of mother and wife, whether working for herself in the meadow or for her employer in Black Hawk. She is a female figure with all the characteristics of an earth goddess. The painful experience of the town is an important turning point in Antonia's transition from immaturity to self-realization. She realizes that she must return to nature because she is an inseparable part of the land.

## 4. Harmonious Union of Men and Women—Self-realization

"Ecofeminism is the search for female emancipation from traditional male authority, the pursuit of self-worth and the preservation of female identity" (Gao Lili, Yang Zhihong 122). After an innocent and happy childhood, a temporary loss in a patriarchal world, and a struggle against domination, Antonia began to awaken and strive for self-worth by reflecting on her marriage.

### 4.1. Antonia's partnership with her husband in marriage

Compared to her first marriage, Antonia's marriage to Anton Cuzak is a happy one. Larry was Antonia's first husband, a passenger conductor. He was unenthusiastic and unwilling to help passengers, a man who often claimed to be "one of those train-crew aristocrats" (Cather 243). "He was usually cold and distant with men, but with all women he had a silent, grave familiarity, a special handshake, accompanied by a significant, deliberate look" (Cather 244).

His lack of devotion often left many women who were smitten with him in tears, including his wife, Antonia. Despite this fact, Antonia loved Larry. She did everything to please her husband, succumbed to a patriarchal ideology that placed a high value on women's unconditional submission to men, and believed anything he said to her. But Larry lied to her. "He is fired for knocking down passengers, but does not tell his finance and stays with her until her money is used up. He deceives Antonia that he is going out to find a job, but does not come back forever" (Zhou Menghua 36).

Antonia gave up a lot in the relationship, and in the end, she was abandoned while pregnant with her child. However, through constant reflection on her first failed relationship with Larry Donova, she began to awaken and strive to realize her self-worth. So, in her second marriage, Antonia stopped relying on men and stopped being subservient. She believes that women should not be at the mercy of others in their own lives, and that men and women should be equal in their relationships. She finally realized all this in her marriage to Anton Cuzak.

When he first met Antonia, Anton Cuzak's thought was "she was exactly the kind of girl he had always been hunting for" (Cather 281). They fell in love with each other and soon they soon

entered into marriage together. "The two seemed to be in terms of easy friendliness, touched with humor. Clearly, she was the impulse, and he was the corrective" (Cather 277). Antonia and Cuzak were more like friends when they said they were husband and wife, the two respected each other and worked together. "In the Cuzaks, domestic raising and caring of children is no longer only the wife's domain; the husband, not the serious and children are not afraid of the father, which is the case in the Harlings; they are close to him" (Zhou Menghua 37).

With her husband Cuzak by her side, they built a spacious farmhouse and orchard together, Antonia worked all day in the fields, gave birth to 11 children, and raised 11 grandchildren. Prior to this marriage, men had been the main laborers in agricultural families, but in this family, Antonia became the main creator and provider of wealth.

Through mutual assistance, Antonia and her husband have transformed barren terrain into thriving fields and orchards. Their farming and family life are peaceful and lovely. All the while, they are rewarded for their efforts by nature.

The novel ends with a vivid description of Antonia's daily life, revealing the fruits of her triumph as the goddess of the earth: the family sits around a sumptuous table for dinner, the children sitting neatly and orderly in two rows by the light of the lamp, one small one next to the other, excited, but attentive to their own behavior, with their eyes fixed on Antonia, who is sitting at the head of the table, serving her food and waiting for it. This scene reveals the bounty of Antonia and the land, surrounded by lovely children and a happy life.

#### **4.2. Antonia's awakening to pursue her subjectivity**

In order to escape her brother's control, Antonia had to work hard on the land, which gave her great confidence and strength, making her realize that she could be as strong as a man and equal to her brother. With the spiritual strength she gains from the land, Antonia dares to challenge her brother's authority, becomes a strong competitor, and surpasses him, as Antonia matures and awakens to an independent sense of individuality.

As Antonia grows, her desire for independence and freedom becomes stronger and stronger. From the beginning, when she was a maid in the Harlem household, she was submissive, and later, when she was threatened to choose between her job and her favorite dance, she did not hesitate to refuse to compromise and chose to give up her job, leaving the Harlem household in style. "For Antonia, dancing was not only entertainment, but a symbol of power and dignity, and no one could stop her from pursuing a happy life" (Gao Lili, Yang Zhihong 122).

Throughout her life, Antonia has overcome many challenges to become a responsible, independent woman, an amiable mother, and an innocent victim, changing the traditional notion of women as fragile and dependent on men, and succeeding in her quest for an independent female identity and economic independence and spiritual peace in a patriarchal society.

Despite her aggravation and distress, she succeeds in breaking patriarchal shackles and finding fulfillment. In a patriarchal culture, she finds a foothold and achieves physical and emotional bliss through her feeling of forging an intimate relationship with nature.

### **5. Conclusion**

*My Antonia* is a novel full of eco-feminist characteristics. By Antonia's journey of self-realization, Willa Cather elaborates on the interdependence between human beings and nature. Willa Cather advocates the achievement of women's self-realization in their interdependence with nature. In the context of today's global environmental degradation, reading Willa Cather's novel from an ecofeminist perspective helps readers reinforce the idea: Building a harmonious and sustainable relationship between human and nature will help to solve to the current environmental crisis and the spiritual wasteland of humanity.

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