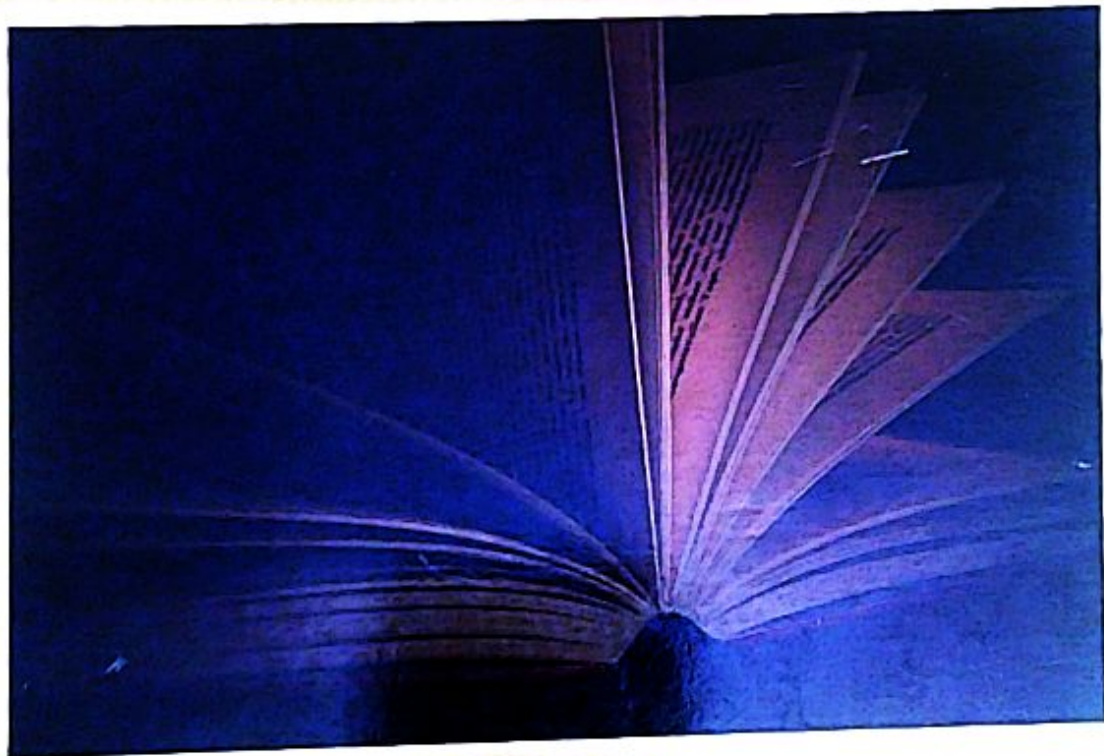


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### Existential Absurdity and Disillusionment: Exploration of Traumatic Experiences of the Pioneers in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*

#### Abstract

The present research paper entitled: "*Existential Absurdity and Disillusionment, Exploration of Traumatic Experiences of the Pioneers in Willa Cather's My Antonia*" explores the existential vision of Willa Cather who documented the confrontation of her protagonists against the forces of nihilism and existentialism prevailing in Nebraska. Cather's *My Antonia* (1938), evokes nostalgia for America's past. The plot of the novel is packed with the episodes of existential absurdity and anxiety of the pioneers. Martin Esslin defines absurdity thus: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots..." (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 20). The pioneers of Willa Cather are alienated from society; they experience pain and feel tormented. The novel focuses on the narrative of Jim's memories of Antonia and the depressed life of the immigrants. The transformation trends in America brought new challenges for the pioneers with the growth of the money culture and the emergence of Jazz and flappers. "And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running" (42). This race for upward mobility is pitted against stillness and isolation.

**KEY WORDS:** Confrontation, Nihilism, Existentialism, Transformation, Jazz, Flappers, Mobility, Immigration, Absurdity.

Willa Cather was greatly impacted by the philosophical ideas of Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and other existential philosophers. Willa Cather didn't blindly imitate the ideas of existentialism and created characters struggling to build cities and railways turning uncultivable prairies into fertile land. The pioneers who migrated to Nebraska prairies were

the real American heroes but they also experienced depression and frustration as nature was very destructive and many of them lost their lives. Born in Virginia on December 7, 1873, Willa Cather spent maximum years of life in Nebraska with her family. She got her education in Nebraska and graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1895. Both in her life and in her fictional worlds, Cather explored the causes of the existential tensions of the life of the pioneers who built Nebraska. Willa Cather witnessed "the world broken into two" and she was caught up in this rift (Sergeant 114). Her experience as a settler and as a writer is a microcosm of the spirit of the time. She was rooted in the past and adored its certainty and stability. She was always haunted by the fear and terror of losing the old values and the fall of the old order and yet she was sensitive to the promise of the future in the new-found land of America. Such ambivalent ambience shaped Willa Cather "with her creative force, as in an iceberg, the greater part of her load submerged" (Sergeant, *A Memoir* 148). Cather's novels and stories chronicle, the plight of the artist during the age of industrialization and progress, and the alienation and initiation of the young. For Willa Cather, the American Midwest, her birth place was her inspiration and the deepest source of her art. In all her life, Cather looked to the prairies from fresh perspective to highlight the struggles, challenges and the absurdities of life.

Existentialism advocates the free will of the individual and Cather takes up the free spirit of the pioneers of Nebraska who struggle to cultivate the barren land of America. Willa Cather's approach is artistic: "Where Camus or Sartre writes about philosophical postal clerks, Cather portrays sensitive, artistic farmers; in all instances, the appearance is gainsaid by the inner vision. For the existential "outsider," life is meaningless; for the pioneers Cather's novel *My Antonia* is a cultural document recording their despair, depression and physical & psychological traumas of life. The critics and reviewers of Willa Cather have highly eulogized her for unmatched "clarity, beauty and simplicity." Each of her novels is identified as an epitome of the struggles of the pioneers; a heartrending tale of existential illusion and disillusionment. The pioneers in this novel feel depressed and often lose interest in life since they feel that life is meaningless. They lack the inner strength to comprehend the mysteries of life and the world around them. They are cut off from their roots with the rise of science and technology; the onset of fashion, sexuality and modernism. They stand naked in the cruel and mysterious universe. They realize that their epical journey is futile. The pioneers of Willa Cather living in Nebraska struggle to question the universe around them. Everything becomes absurd for them, even their consciousness. Willa Cather has depicted a fascinating exploration of the pioneers' experience in the wild plains. In her book *Willa*

*Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, Joan Acocella explains that "Cather is traditionally regarded as the elegist of the pioneer period, the repository of what America thinks of as its early, true-grit triumphs" (127). Willa Cather gives an insight into old American culture and the contribution of the pioneers to the development of Nebraska. Will Cather has depicted the existential struggles of the pioneers and their confrontation with the absurdities of life at the early stage of American history. Cather has also taken up the themes of friendship, family, and freedom in *My Antonia*. Jo Ann Middleton in *Willa Cather's Modernism* (1990) avers that Willa Cather's *My Antonia* depicts the plight of the pioneers and the collapse of American Dream (Middleton 41). Set in the background of the turmoil of World War I and of a period of rapid change in the American society, *My Antonia* (1913) is existential and absurdist in true spirit. The plot unfolds many events depicting the change of cultures, homes and languages and destinies of Jim and Antonia Shimerda and Jim Burden. The plot gives an insight into the conflicts between old farm culture and modernism & capitalism and science & industry. Willa Cather reveals her land philosophy and the nature of the existential struggles of the protagonists in the march to civilization. The land is at the heart of the novel and the pioneers are seen struggling to own ranches for prosperity. The settlers have to confront the absurdity of life particularly during bad years. The pioneers had to fight the prairie land, the packed grass and sod that covered it. It was a challenging job for them to break the sod to plant corn, wheat and other crops. Since the modern agricultural implements were not available, they had to break up the sod with axes and hand plows. Their real physical and psychological pain began with the outbreak of deadly skin diseases; drought and the attack of the locusts that destroyed their crops and caused severe privation. Drought, prairie fires, and frost could also attack their hard-won planted fields. All these hardships are realistically depicted by Cather exploring their inner turbulent life.

The first seven chapters of the novel *My Antonia* are introductory; the heroine of the novel and her family is introduced along with the prairie landscape. Jim lost his parents and he left Virginia and reached to Nebraska after a long journey. He meets his grandparents and the Shimerdas. The existential despair of Antonia begins in the opening part of the novel. Jim is shocked to learn that Antonia has been betrayed by a bus conductor who promised marriage. He seduced Antonia and impregnated her. Antonia is a frontier girl; she lost her innocence in the first stroke of her love relationship. Betrayal in love intensifies the tragic mood of the novel. Jim learns that she has returned to the family home to give birth to a child. When Jim visits a disgraced Antonia nearly two years after the birth of her daughter, he begins to reestablish their friendship, but they will not reach true accord until Jim returns to

Black Hawk 20 years later and discovers that his Antonia has remained true to her essential self and thereby fulfilled her destiny. In consequence, the novel acquires an elegiac tone, sadness and a sense of loss pervades the novel.

Antonia Shimerda is clearly a symbolic character in the novel. She gives her ring to Jim who finds "something reckless and extravagant" in her wish. She is always giving something away, and what she chiefly gives is herself—to her father, to grandmother Burden, to the Harlings, to the Widow Steavens, but especially to Jim and eventually to her own family. Her loss of innocence is heart rending as the forces of change and transformation bulldoze her personality. The interesting thing about Antonia Shimerda is her dignity and self respect and her grandeur of character in spite of the physical loss. Even during her bleakest days; during the first bitter winter that finds her living like an animal in a sod house, in the aftermath of her beloved father's suicide and as she grows big with an illegitimate child, Antonia remains a supreme character like the great tragic heroines of Shakespeare. Jim comments thus: "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (Willa Cather, *My Antonia* 29). Mr. Shimerda is a tragic character believing in futility and nothingness of life. He feels that life is useless and the only alternative left for him is suicide. Camus observes that the only way to enjoy happiness and satisfaction in life is to embrace death. No wonder, Mr. Shimerda returned to his sod home, but he was old and frail, and knew nothing. He was ill and sad, and "his face looked like ashes—all the warmth and light had died out (99). The quest of Mr. Shimerda is futile; he looks helpless and defeated. He suffers from the corrosion of self and is the victim of despair and intolerable anguish. Kierkegaard observes that he "cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing" (Kierkegaard 110). Sartre presented the concept of broken and fragmented self in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). He observes that the self of man is free to act but all his actions lead him to death and despair. Mr. Shimerda is trapped in the farming business and all his struggles end in despair. Sartre has a very dismal and nihilistic view about man as he says: "Man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not" (Sartre 17).

Overcome by difficulties and hardships, he committed suicide. Grandma Burden is shocked to observe the dead body as she groans: "Poor soul, poor soul I would like to think he never done it. He was always considerate and un-wishful to give trouble. How could he forget himself and bring this on us (96). Mr. Shimerda was sick of life that he committed suicide and cast his family into dreadful sorrow. The nature was against the life of Mr. Shimerda as heavy rain blocked his way for decent burial after death. The trains were not

running so the priest for ceremonial ritual couldn't reach on time. Each character in the novel believes that his suicide is an act of moral transgression: "Yes, sir, that is very bad for them. Their father has done a great sin; Our Lord has said that. We believe that Mr. Shimerda's soul will come to its Creator as well off without a priest (105). Antonia is a powerful character symbolizing the soul and the spirit of the Middle West but her life is also full of tragic events and the mood of pessimism and despair engulfs her till the end of the novel. Tragedy clustered around her with the death of her father and foulness of Wick Cutter and her seduction by Larry Donovan. Antonia was engaged, spent much time packing her trunks with beautiful linens and heirlooms from the old country, went to marry Larry Donovan, but was seduced and abandoned. Mrs. Steavens expresses her sentiments of grief to Jim: "Jimmy, I felt bowed with despair. My Antonia, that had so much good in her, had come home disgraced (354). Antonia deeply loved her father, and often visited his grave:"Look at my Papa here; he's been dead all these years, and yet he is more real to me than almost anybody else. He never goes out of my life. I talk to him and consult him all the time. The older I grow, the better I know him and the more I understand him (357). Antonia married a farmer and had eleven children; she struggled in all her life but ultimately her life remained empty and had to live with a void. Jim commented thus on her existential struggles and sufferings: "She had everything; she was a woman whose inner glow had faded" Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) tracing the history of futility of life. Mr. Shimerda and Antonia don't find any certainty in world. They are helpless creatures encountering absurdity and getting defeated at the end. They are always in conflict with truth & illusion, dreams & reality and are torn between infinities, between absolutes Willa Cather has dramatized the existential realities of the pioneers in her novel *My Antonia* articulating her existential vision through the epical struggles of Mr. Shimerda and Antonia.

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