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19.	DEATH AND DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE OF THE PIONEERS IN WILLA CATHER'S OIPIONEERS AND MY ANTONIA	DR. BALKAR SINGH MS. RITU GUPTA	91
20.	HELPLESS PROTAGONIST IN THE COBWEB OF MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S GHASHIRAM KOTWAL AND SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION	DR. SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA	98
21.	DISTORT AND FRAGMENT NARRATIVE IN AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD	MS. SHIPRA JAIN	101
22.	PERSONAL GROWTH INITIATIVE AMONG STUDENTS : A META-ANALYSIS	DR. NIMISHA BERI MANDEEP SAMPLA	105
23.	THE SEARCH FOR AN ELUSIVE SHEEP : MAGICAL REALIST MYSTERY IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S A WILD SHEEP CHASE	DR. VANI KHURANA MS. RASLEENA THAKUR	110
24.	IMPLEMENTING FINDINGS OF BODY LANGUAGE METHODOLOGIES IN CLASS-ROOM TEACHING- A STUDY ON PHYSICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS	MS. KAMALPREET KAUR	115
25.	POSTMODERN DETERMINISM IN JERZY KOSINSKI'S NOVEL PINBALL	DR. MUZAFAR AHMAD BHAT DR. AJOY BATTA	118
26.	THE RECRUITMENT OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL COLLEGE INSTRUCTORS IN MALAWI	WONGANI RAXON MCHIZI DR. NIMISHA BERI	122
27.	CONFRONTATION WITH THE RANDOMNESS OF UNIVERSE : ALIENATION OF TODD ANDREWS AND JACOB HORNER IN JOHN BARTH'S THE FLOATING OPERA AND THE END OF THE ROAD	DR. NIPUN CHAUDHARY MEENU DUTTA	125
28.	THE ROLE OF SELF EFFICACY IN ACHIEVEMENT OF ADOLESCENTS : REVIEW ANALYSIS	DR. NIMISHA BERI	130
29.	AUGMENTING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE OF ADOLESCENTS FEMALE WITH MIXED MARTIAL ART ACTIVITIES	DR. ARUNA RANI	135
30.	TAKE-OFF CHARACTERISTICS OF LONG JUMP : A KINEMATIC ANALYSIS	MR. RAJNEESH BHATI DR. BHANU PRATAP	140
31.	RELATIONSHIP OF KINEMATIC VARIABLES OF FOOTBALL PLAYERS DURING INSTEP KICK	MR. RAJNEESH BHATI DR. BHANU PRATAP	144
32.	A COMPARISON OF SPIROMETRIC INVESTIGATION OF FOOTBALL AND HOCKEY PLAYERS	DR. REETA DEVI	148
33.	COMPARISON OF PHYSICAL FITNESS BETWEEN HARYANA AND PUNJAB RURAL SCHOOL BOYS	DR. SUKHJIVAN SINGH PARAMJEET SINGH	151
34.	EMOTIONAL MATURITY AND FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS : A REVIEW PAPER	DR. PREETI BALA ALIYA MAJEED	155
35.	CORRELATIONAL PATTERN OF RORSCHACH'S INDICES	DR. MANISH KUMAR VERMA DR. SMITA TRIVEDI DR. SARITA MISRA	160
36.	EMOTIONAL MATURITY AMONG INDIAN AND AFGHAN STUDENTS : A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY	HAMIDULLAHAESAR ANGEL ANU JOHN	164
37.	EXPLORING TOTALITARIANISM AND POST-WAR CONDITIONS IN KHALID HOSSEIN'S A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS	RAVI BHATT DR. DIGVIJAY PANDYA AINAAB TARIQ	168



DEATH AND DESTRUCTIVE CULTURE OF THE PIONEERS IN WILLA CATHER'S O!PIONEERS AND MY ANTONIA

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ABSTRACT

Willa Cather is a prominent American novelist known for her deep study of the early pioneers who migrated from Europe and other parts of the world to settle in America. She keenly observes the pioneers 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. Cather explores 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 experiences as a settler and as a writer are a microcosm of the spirit of the time. She is rooted in the past and adored its certainty and stability. She is always haunted by the fear and terror of losing the old values and the fall of the old order and yet she is sensitive to the promise of the future in the new-found land of America. Cather's novels and stories chronicle, the plight of the pioneers during the age of industrialization and progress, and the alienation and initiation of the young. Her novels evoke the struggles of the pioneers, their trials, tribulations and the loss of innocence in the growing mercantile society. The major concern of Willa Cather is to reflect the epical struggles of the pioneers of Nebraska and to explore the mystery of death. She is not pessimistic but her characters are involved in an epical struggle for survival. Death is depicted as inevitable as her novels depict a connection between the dying and their natural environment. There is a conflict between the culture and the values of the pioneers and the changes brought by science and technology in Nebraska society. In this paper, the texts of Willa Cather are explored and investigated applying the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud.

Keywords: Death, Destructive, Pioneers, Prairies, Alienation, Despair Repression, Industrialization, Struggles

Introduction

Willa Cather's major novels deal with the episodes of disillusion and the loss of innocence of the pioneers and the destructive nature of the mercantile culture that ruined the old values turning American Dream into nightmares. Critics have identified Cather as a canonical American writer who took up the serious themes of depression and despair in the life of the pioneers. Cather's concern for the problems of pioneers settled in the Nebraska prairies and farming communities made her an international celebrity. Sinclair Lewis observed that

"Miss Cather is Nebraska's foremost citizen, the United States knows Nebraska because of Willa Cather's books." Willa Cather gives an insight into old American culture and depicts the plight of the pioneers of Nebraska and their struggles and sufferings. The critics and reviewers of Willa Cather have eulogized her for unmatched "clarity, beauty and simplicity" in dramatizing the heart rending woes of the pioneers. Each of her novels is identified as an epitome of a heartrending tale of disillusionment and of the loss of their pristine innocence. Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) is a poignant tale of

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the settlement of the American frontiers. Willa Cather has an emotional attachment with the culture and the values of the frontier. Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* to celebrate the legendary and mythological nature of frontier culture in an age when there were conflicts between tradition and modernity. The main section of the plot is devoted to the decline of the frontier and its values and the emergence of violence, corruption, greed and human degradation and frustration of the characters. In *O Pioneers!* the main character is Alexandra Bergson who is rooted in her farm of four hundred acres built by her father. Her father John Bergson has emigrated from Sweden and he heroically battles in life for survival and to pay off mortgage in life but in his epical struggle, he dies broken hearted, in debt and in desperation. His long journey of exploration, experiment and battling with the wilderness of prairies ends in a nightmare. Keith Wilhite opines that in her novel *O!Pioneers!* Cather has depicted the heart rending sufferings of the immigrants. Cather dramatizes the conflicts that shatter the community of the Divide. Girard contends that extra-marital sex appears as a major threat to communal harmony of the Divide.

Cather's *My Antonia* (1913) is elegiac in tone, celebrating human frustration and loss of values of the pioneers. Cather puts faith in the eternal values of life dramatizing the loss and glory of the pioneers who are forced to assimilate in the money culture of America. The pioneers has to fight the prairie land, the packed grass and sod that covered it. It is 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 realistically depicted by Cather explore their inner turbulent life. The novel is based on the memory of relationship of Jim and Antonia and their friendship, the web of memories and love affairs form the texture of the plot of *My Antonia*. Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* depicts the emergence of new society in America and the decline of the values of prairie culture. Antonia represents

the culture of the prairie woman and their struggle of people to preserve that culture. Her tragic tale is narrated by Jim who is a rational law student depicting the death, suicide and fracture of identity of Antonia. The plot of the novel is replete with the images of dissonance, shadows and alienation.

In the novel, *O!Pioneers*, the symptoms of psychological disorders begin at the very beginning of the novel. Alexandra is all the time stressed because of the burden of paying off the loans raised for the cultivation of the barren land. The first tragedy in her life is the death of her father whom she loves very much. She feels that her world has become barren and dreary with the death of her father. Willa Cather develops the stages of psychological disorders of Alexandra Bergson and the first stroke is the death of her father. Kernberg observes that death of a loving one is a great setback to the mental equilibrium of a human being. He observes thus:

The human imagination, in many ways, must be understood as a primary neurotic response to the reality of death, to the existential demand to imagine what cannot be imagined and in so doing overcome death; to bring death back into the orbit of life. It is the manner in which these two forces play out in relation to the dynamics of everyday life that the cultural character of the human imagination takes its form. (118)

Alexandra Bergson is shattered by the tragic death of her father; her brothers are young and mother is already passing through a period of mental stress. She finds her life full of challenges and uncertainties and often in desperation, she thinks of ending her life. John Bergson "spent five years on the Divide getting into debt and the last six getting out of it" (8). He owns a huge track of land but land remains an "enigma" to him. "It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness that runs wild and kicks things to pieces" (8). The image of the wild horse is very effective describing the uncertain and enigmatic life of John Bergson and of all the characters on the Divide. Freud talks of death drives that were conceived as "an instinct to 'return and repeat' to an earlier stage of psycho-social development that the subject had been forced to abandon due to pressure from external forces" (47). David Daiches (1951) observes that "the main theme of the novel is the hardness of the land

which offered its pioneering settlers disappointment and disaster more often than success". Breuer and Sigmund Freud in their collaborative work *Studies on Hysteria* put the theory of Neurosis and psychic depression stating thus:

The disproportion between the many years' duration of the hysterical symptom and the single occurrence that provoked it is what we are accustomed invariably to find in traumatic neuroses. Quite frequently, it is some event in childhood that sets up a more or less severe symptom which persists during the years that follow. (The Standard Edition 4).

Alexandra Bergson becomes a psychic wreck after the tragic killing of her brother Emil. He is very dear to her; she wants to send him to Harvard University for higher education but all her dreams end in acute despair. She is almost in a trance as she goes to his grave in the night during a storm and is found there in the morning drenched and icy cold by Ivar Czar. He is shocked to find her in a state of trauma, almost half dead. Her father John Bergson has put high hopes on her ignoring his two grown up boys, Oscar and Lou. John Bergson has recognized in his daughter "the strength of will and the simple direct way of thinking things out" (9). Her fate is to "face something" and Alexandra knows that her future is bleak and the vision of her imagination strains toward it: "her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance" (6). She is married with the land as all other things are meaningless to her. But the irony is, in spite of her big farm and huge track of land, she feels alienated and isolated from the land, from her friends and brothers. She enjoys some moments of love with Carl Linstrum who is "a thin, frail boy, with brooding dark eyes, very quiet in all his movements" (10). He is not interested to work and struggle in the hard land of Nebraska and he leaves the Divide in search for his fulfillment. Carl regards Alexandra's friendship in sweet words "You've stood by us through so much and helped father out so many times" (50). Alexandra is also moved by these sentiments and says: "I expect that understanding is the only way one person ever really can help another" (51). With Carl's departure, Alexandra has to depend on her brother who is her anti-thesis; they don't contribute to the growth of Alexandra and have no sensitivity and human

sympathy. Alexandra's sexual frigidity and repression is a source of her alienation and depression. According to Freud repression is a normal part of human development but sexual repression leads to mental disturbance and often leads to neurotic behavior:

When we are faced with obstacles to satisfaction of our libido's cathexis, when we experience traumatic events, or when we remain fixated on either phases of our development, the conflict between the libido and the ego (or between the ego and the super ego) can lead to alternative sexual discharge and its absence leads to the neurotic behavior. (Sexual Repression 12)

Willa Cather gives the images of "violence", "confinement" and "conflict" in the very opening of the novel to describe the interior loneliness of Alexandra Bergson. Her home is a site of friction and potential conflict. Frederick Taber Cooper reviewed the novel as "a slow-moving and frankly depressing tale" (Murphy 112). Her big house is unfurnished and uneven in comfort. The house is at once expansive and disjointed; here old and new worlds collide.

The plot is riddled with confusions and misinterpretations and Alexandra is alone to fight with the hard land and the cruel nature. Her brothers fail to understand her and are uncompromising, creating conflict in the family. She confides to Carl that she has little to do with her brothers and that her independent ways alienate them. Alexandra tells Carl that her survival is very difficult as she has to fight with the external forces and the forces of the family and community. She equates purpose and survival with a sense of the larger world: "If the world were no wider than cornfields, if there were no something beside this, I wouldn't feel that it was much worthwhile to work" (124). She applies family pride and takes a firm stand as she says "We ought to do more than they do, and see further ahead" (68). In desperation and heavy mood, she expresses adverse effects of her sacrifices in fulfilling her pledge to her father and tells Lou and Oscar admitting her failure. "I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was, If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard like a tree" (171).

Alexandra tries hard to break her loneliness depending upon the company of Emil and Marie. She

gives freedom to Emil: "He shall do whatever he wants to do" and tells Carl: "He is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I have worked for" (117). Cather dramatizes brother-sister relationship in a poignant way as Alexandra puts her faith on the future of Emil but he betrays her sister bringing her psychological pain. She sends him to Michigan to study law but he is not interested in study. His priority is Marie and not the future. Alexandra lives in illusion and puts faith on Emil: "She felt no anxiety about Emil. She had always believed in him, as she had believed in the land" (239). Alexandra fails to understand the love relationship of Emil and Marie. She develops intimacy with Marie to break off the alienation. They enjoy their physical affection and the critics observe that there was lesbian relationship between Marie and Alexandra and this is the only alternative left for the heroine to overcome her sexual repression. She has Marie in mind when she tells Carl: "The young people, they live so hard. And yet I sometimes envy them" (119). Marie elopes with Frank at the age of eighteen and marries him. Alexandra envies Marie who takes a decisive action but she couldn't decide to marry Carl because she faces tough opposition from her brothers. She says: "She's too pretty and young for this sort of life" (121). She further comments expressing her psychological anguish: "We're all over so much older and slower" (121). When Lou and Oscar suspect Alexandra marrying Carl they argue her out of property rights and ridicule her to marry "such a tramp at her age" (167). Oscar takes the lead and insults his sister in derogatory language: "Everybody's laughing to see you get took in... Why, Alexandra you are forty years old" (172). Emil also doesn't appreciate the proposal of Carl and uses his arguments to dissuade Alexandra marrying Carl:

He was a little ashamed for his sister, though he had tried not to show it. He felt that there was something indecorous in her proposal, and she did seem to him somewhat ridiculous. There was trouble enough in the world, he reflected, as he threw himself upon his bed, without people who were forty years old imagining they wanted to get married. In the darkness and silence Emil was not likely to think long about Alexandra. Every image slipped away but one. (179)

All brothers of Alexandra are insensitive and her father and don't recognize the emotional need of their sister who is forty and is leading a lonely life struggling with the hard land. As the novel progresses, Alexandra grows emotionally bankrupt and sexually frigid. Freud (1950) recognized that the natural discharge of psychic energy is the drive not only has a sexual aim but also has what might be termed a "deathly aim" that to "reduce, keep constant or remove internal tension" (76). Hey Witt (2008) in his article "Sigmund Freud: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Repression" observes that "people have strong instincts toward sexuality but they are repressed by people in order to meet the constraints imposed on them by civilized life" (22). Alexandra's sexual repression intensifies and she "pours buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body" (206) to overcome her sexual passions. Alexandra becomes the most prosperous woman of the Divide but her material prosperity doesn't give her internal peace and contentment because all the external forces are against her. The brothers misunderstand her; her community is against her as her neighbors are always criticizing her for supporting Ivar as he doesn't enjoy any honor in the community; Marie misinterprets Frank's fitness as a husband, Emil misreads Alexandra's interest in Carl and even Alexandra doesn't recognize the bond between Emil and Marie before their tragic assassination.

All these misunderstandings create complications in the plot and put heavy pressure on the psyche of Alexandra. The entire plot of the novel is devoted to the psychological interior of Alexandra who is the victim of confusion and misunderstandings. Willa Cather has dramatized the inner conflicts of Alexandra, the conflict between old and new foreshadows the more violent and dramatic conflicts that shakes the community of the Divide. In Willa Cather's novel *O' Pioneers*, all the major characters are depressed and mentally disturbed. Alexandra, Emil, Marie, Frank, Ivar and Carl are leading a hopeless life. Frank's struggle to tame his unruly wife is paralleled with the cultivation of the wild prairie and his violent action symbolizes his own confinement. His attempt to control Marie is an action of his own turbulent mind and a deed committed by a neurotic person fired by jealousy and hatred.

The conspicuous feature of Willa Cather's *My Antonia* is the movement from possession to loss and from union to separation. The three suicides in the plot of the novel symbolize the theme of death and destruction, despair and frustration in the new world of America after World War I. Jim's narrative traces the spirit of rejection and loss overwhelming Mr. Shimerda and Antonia. The familiar, green, closed in Virginia country side was replaced by landscape of shaggy red grass "not a country but the material out of which countries are made" (Willa Cather, *My Antonia* 79). This uprooting gave a cultural shock to Willa Cather and shaped her attitude and perception: "I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction" (11). Willa Cather articulates the atmosphere of darkness; death and despair through the images of nature:

On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share-black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, picture writing on the sun. (Cather 14)

Mr. Shimerda has immigrated to America. He doesn't want to leave his country but has to do that because of his wife who has a strong notion that America is a land of opportunities. She says that all their wishes will be fulfilled. They will get money, prosperity and good matches for their daughters. Mr. Shimerda cannot withstand the pressures of the prairie land. He is not able to watch his daughter working so hard and still not getting enough to eat. He decides to kill himself. His suicide is a glaring picture of the destructive culture of the prairies. Mr. Shimerda's death is a great setback for Antonia. She feels herself all alone in this vast world. She has to struggle hard and work on the land for survival. She informs Jim that "she would work like mans" and made "this land one good farm" (81). In chapter nineteen of Book One, Antonia exclaim; "Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house!...I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man" (81). Cather gives the image of Antonia interacting with the wildlife drifting lazily "through the magical light

of the late afternoon" (28) and she is seen tilling the land for her survival and to save the family from starvation and death. Antonia struggles to escape from the trauma of her father's death wearing the clothes of her father and forcing herself to work like a man. She is obsessed to fulfill the legacy of her father. Willa Cather depicts the crude image of Antonia thus:

Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength. I knew, too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it. (84)

She knows that it is not simple for a woman to work like a man but she is helpless and has no choice. All her dreams and romantic hopes are shattered and she assumes a nihilistic attitude toward life. She doesn't meet Jim who had been a source of friendly strength reliving her tensions and worries. Jim observes her conventional and morose attitude as he says:

Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed: "My Antonia. (84).

Willa Cather has used the images of loss and pain to depict the struggles of Antonia; she is "sunburned" "dust-plastered" and she moves to Black Hawk with her new identity as "hired girl" of Harlings. In the opening and closing her novel, Cather signals that the novel cannot transmit the past; the past cannot be shared only possessed by Jim and Antonia. Past is the material from which Jim constructs his own story, his own conception of himself and his life. Jim admits, he must "say a great deal about myself. It's through myself that I knew and felt...I've had no practice in any other form of presentation" (5). Jim admits that his novel is all about himself and not the picture of Antonia it purports to be" (5). Jim traces the history of some characters in the novel he is not involved. He talks of Tony's success in Alaska, or Lena's life as a seamstress but he fails to provide any deeper interpretation of their lives. He believes that the suicide of Mr. Shimerda was preventable, he never

suggested any positive help. Jim experiences neglect and feels depressed when Antonia expresses her indifference to respond his love and when a chivalrous gesture results in a beating, Jim feels embarrassed and leaves the world of prairie to join the college without bidding her farewell.

Jim's life in New York is dull and boring and restructures his past to explore the meaning of life. He has been marked by disappointments that would be served enough to chill dispositions less naturally "romantic and ardent" than Jim's (Cather 4). At college away from home and Antonia, Jim is leading a traumatic life as all the time his old memories of Nebraska prairie haunt him but he has to confront the reality being a law student at Harvard. He has been feeling restless and depressed for twenty years because he cannot forget the best days of his life spent in the company of Antonia. The problem with Jim is that he fails to articulate his love for Antonia and remains confused and bewildered watching all the events like an ignorant spectator. Gelfant reads Jim's inaccurate vision of the past as evidence of his traumatized sexuality. At the university at Lincoln, he comes in contact with a girl Lena Lingard, one of the hired girls. During these days he comes to know that Antonia has been betrayed by a man who promised marriage. He impregnated her and she has gone to home to give birth to a child. Jim feels very sorry for her who has become the victim of money culture and false values of the new age. Her loss of innocence is the main interest of Willa Cather in this part of the novel. He meets Antonia after two years of the birth of her daughter to reestablish their friendship but after twenty years. Jim returns to Black Hawk. Jim finds Antonia completely transformed, her beauty and innocence has vanished as she has become a hard and sturdy prairie woman who has lost everything: love, romantic dreams and natural grace. Jim observes thus:

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. (353)

The image of a "battered" woman is very effective in conveying the theme of loss and death dominating the plot. Willa Cather compares Antonia with Lena who represents the role of a woman to suit him in adulthood,

sexuality and style. Blanche Gelfant (1982) has analyzed the character of Jim and Antonia claiming that Antonia is a "battered woman" and Jim is a sick character suffering from inner turmoil and restlessness. Gelfant sees Jim as a "young man whose adolescence" confronts him with the possibility of danger in woman" (184).

Jim is ambiguous and confused in his relation with Antonia. It is pertinent to note that Jim also struggles with an urge toward suicide in the novel. Jim even wishes he had died as a child: when he and Antonia meet as adults near Mr. Shimerda's grave Jim feels "the old pull of the earth which makes him wish he could be a little boy again and that my way could end there" (207). Jim is very much disturbed as the memories of Mr. Shimerda's suicide becomes fresh in his mind. Jim's ambivalent desire for death has followed him through the novel like his shadow on the prairie. Jim then can ask that death is the only way he ever attain the pleasure of selflessness. When he looks at the dead boy of Mr. Shimerda he feels that death can also be a return to the comfort of the womb. He sees Mr. Shimerda lying in the coffin in a fetal position "on his side with his knees drawn up" (75). Jim is visibly disturbed at the suicides in the novel. No wonder, the suicide scenes go deep into his memory and haunt him day and night. Jim having completed his undergraduate degree returns to Black Hawk for a summer holiday prior to entering law school. He reconnects his relationship with Antonia to revive his lost past because the old memories are a safety valve for him to get release from the tensions and traumas of life.

Jim for the last time calls "my Antonia" and he belongs to the world of death. He remains childless, trapped in a sterile and unloving marriage. He is a practitioner of law that helps the railroads develop in the Mid West. But in reality throughout the novel Jim is something like the shadows in Hades as the Odyssey describes. Jim is forty when he reunites with Antonia marrying and becoming a lawyer and setting in New York. Jim has come back to reestablish his friendship with Antonia before joining law school at Harvard. He has become a successful professional but with a void.

Conclusion

The recurrent theme of the novel is the dark dimension, depicted through the images of dark shadows.

blizzards of heavy snow and darkness of the clouds hanging on the prairies. This aspect of the novel points with insistence violence and negation of human life suggesting that all events of life end in futility. The indication of the theme of death, darkness and despair is given with Jim's adventure with the rattlesnake. The reptile becomes a symbol of the ancient, eldest Evil and Jim states that "certainly his kind have left horrible unconscious members in all war blooded life" (17). Willa Cather has dramatized the frustration, psychological depression and alienation and emptiness of the Antonia-Jim relationship repeatedly in the course of the plot. Antonia has suffered, has lost her innocence, has borne an illegitimate daughter and has returned to the family farm. Jim and Antonia lead their lives differently, their paths are divergent and will continue diverge till death but both are linked with the sense of loss, depression and frustration and both express a wish to die to escape from the harsh realities of human existence.

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