

## American Dreams on the Frontiers Community in Cather's My Antonia

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### ABSTRACT

*Literature is a space to express sociological issues that are absorbed by the author in the society around him/her as a social phenomenon. The research in this article is a sociological literary research which aims to present the issue of American Dreams values in the novel My Antonia which are absorbed from Willa Cather's sociological experience in American frontier communities in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. American Dreams is a spirit that binds common ideals in order to unite the heterogeneity of the American people into a superior nation in various aspects of life. The issue of American Dreams in the novel My Antonia is analyzed using a scientific method called the Literary Sociology Approach. It emphasizes the author's imagination to literary works have genetics in human sociological life to document certain phenomena in certain societies. Researchers found 7 out of 10 American Dreams values in the spirit of frontier people in the western region of America as documented in the novel My Antonia by Willa Cather, namely Liberty, Democracy, Equality, Opportunity, Education, Progress, and Peace. Liberty is the freedom to determine one's own destiny, Democracy is the right to express one's desires as an independent person, Equality is equal treatment before the law, Opportunity is taking advantage of opportunities for the nation progress, Education is the spirit of seeking knowledge to create new discoveries, Progress is actualizing all potential to achieve prosperity, and Peace is the upholding of human rights to maintain the universal security of humanity.*

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### 1. Introduction

America is a large country inhabited by people from various nations, so this country has heterogeneity in various aspects such as language, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, and others. They come from England, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Russia, China, Japan, Africa, and so on. Nevins, et al. (1966) divided their arrival into two periods, namely the first wave since the early 17th century and the second wave since the early 19th century. They came to America from the beginning of the 17th century to the mid-18th century, known as the first wave of immigrants who then occupied the eastern region of America facing the Atlantic Ocean. According to Olsen in Abbas (2024), this region is called the Old Nations which consists of 13 New England colonies, namely Virginia (1607), New York (1609), Plymouth (1620), Massachusetts Bay (1630), Connecticut (1630), Maryland (1634), Rhode Island (636), New Haven (1637), North Carolina (1650), South Carolina (1670), Pennsylvania (1681), Delaware (1681), and Georgia (1732). Their population in 1775 according to Cineotta et al., (2004) was 2,500,000 people. Then, after the American Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, around the beginning of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, a second wave of immigrants to the American mainland took place. Their arrival caused the American population to increase significantly tenfold from 2,500,000 people to 23,500,000 people in 1850 (Cineotta et al., 2004; Rahman, 2017; Rahman et al., 2023). Most of them after the Civil War ended in 1865 moved westward to America, building new settlements and clearing fields. They are known as pioneers who later built a new community called the American frontier. The new territorial areas in the western region of America which include Nebraska, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Wyoming, California, Idaho, Arkansas, Colorado, and others are referred to as New Countries which face the Pacific Ocean.

The focus of the discussion in this article is the American frontier society that inhabits the western region of America. The first generation known as the pioneers group came to the area in the mid-19th century and worked hard to

open up wild lands which were still inhabited by wild animals and hostile Indian tribes. Billington and Ridge (2001) stated that the aim of the arrival of the pioneers was to expand settlements, look for new wider and more fertile farming land, build livestock areas in large grasslands, explore gold mines, excavate coal, and so on. They came to the American west gradually in one large group consisting of tens to hundreds of families and this community was called the frontier. The characteristic of frontier communities is that they travel thousands of kilometers using wagons to find areas suitable for habitation and farming. The life of the first generation of frontiers had to work hard and in the early stages often experienced failure in managing fields and livestock. Montrie (2005) stated that men and women work together in working the fields, growing crops, harvesting field products, looking for firewood, herding livestock, and so on. This collaboration builds awareness of gender relations in an atmosphere of emotional bonding which has an impact on gender equality in their family and married life. After decades, they are generally able to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Food products sold to markets or brought to cities are wheat, corn, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, pumpkin, strawberries, and others. Bison is a game animal that is sold on the market in the form of its skin, horns, fur, and meat. The pets sold are cows, horses, sheep, pigs, turkeys, and others. The gender relationship in fulfilling household needs is that the husband plays a role in the production sector, while the wife carries out reproductive duties. The frontier era ended after access to rail transportation and telecommunications facilities penetrated the American West from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Murdoch (2001) states that each state has a different end date for the frontier era, such as Oklahoma ending in 1907, Arizona and Texas ending in 1912, Nevada ending in 1916, and Alaska being the last state to end the frontier era in 1959. Frontier communities are an important part of achieving the American Dreams.

The American Dreams are an idea fought for by British and European immigrants since its arrival in the 17th century. Paludan (2004) said that American Dreams are imaginations that encourage people from various nations to come to the land of hope called America in order to achieve freedom, prosperity, justice, democracy, peace, intelligence, and so on. They dream of living in a land of hope that guarantees equal rights before the constitution, freedom to carry out activities under the protection of human rights, living peacefully in a tolerant society, fertile land that guarantees prosperity and fulfills basic human needs, knowledge is valued as the result of creative innovation and is accepted logically. This imagination continues to develop from generation to generation from the past, present, and future until it becomes the moral values of the American people. Miharso (2009) views these values as deeply rooted in the culture that has brought the American nation forward as a global power today. These American Dreams are also reflected deeply in the world of literature as imagined by Cather (2014) in the novel *My Antonia*. This novel tells the story of the American frontier generation who dream of social change as identified in the values of the American Dreams, so the title of this article is constructed in one statement, namely the American Dream on The Frontiers Community In Cather's *My Antonia*.

The research in this article is intended to find documentation of the spirit values of the American frontier people as part of the American Dreams in literary narratives. On the other hand, this article can also be used by literary researchers and literary observers as an enrichment of knowledge regarding the application of literary sociology to certain groups of society. A number of previous studies that are relevant to this article include Wang (2019) who compared the awareness of the woman Antonia in the novel *My Antonia* by Willa Cather and Pontellier in the novel *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin in fighting for her hopes based on a theory of Maslow's Needs. The novel *My Antonia* was also presented by Hayati (2019) which highlighted patriarchal gender roles in the female characters Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard based on feminist theory. The similarity with this article is that it focuses on the same novel, namely *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. The difference between the research of these two articles and the novelty of this article is that those articles of Wang and Hayati emphasize structural elements in characterization in fictional narratives, while this article focuses on the sociological issues of the American nation which are documented in literary works, namely the American Dreams on The Frontiers Community In Cather's *My Anthony*. This research expresses the notion of the lives of the novel's characters who reflect the American Dreams among frontier communities in realizing an advanced and superior of American nation.

## **2. Methodology**

Literary sociology is the basis for researchers' thinking in finding documentation of the spirit values of the American Dreams of American frontier people in literary narratives. This thinking is built on the ideas of Goldman (1981) who emphasizes that literary works are the product of an author who lives in a particular social situation in a particular community. The author is a genius human being who has social sensitivity to the phenomena around him/her as empirical facts so that he/she is able to respond to these phenomena through the construction of his/her imaginative

power. According to Abbas, et al. (2023), although a literary work is a fictional narrative, it has sociological values from the author's source of inspiration. Fictional narratives are built from the author's deep awareness that combines thoughts, feelings, and soul about social issues that occur in society. So it can be said that literary fiction narratives are built from the author's empirical facts regarding social reality documented in his/her memory. Willa Cather is a female writer from the American frontier generation who witnessed the phenomenon of frontier community life and is considered to have documented this phenomenon throughout the 19th century until the early 20th century in a number of her literary works such as *My Antonia*, written in 1918 (Yukman, 1988; Rahman & Amir, 2019).

The sociological-based literary research method that Faruk (2014) terms literary sociology is a form of scientific literary analysis based on certain social values in a group, community, society, nation, and so on. These social values become research issues explored in literary narratives. Sociology is built from objective-empirical understanding and awareness that can be reached in the reality of daily life. Abbas (2020) said that literature exists as a medium for the author's imagination to document this sociological phenomenon. Language as a literary medium is the author's symbolic expression in narrating human activities so that fictional language narratives are imitations of social reality. It's like the flowers in a painting are imitations of flowers that grow in the garden. Likewise, the equestrian statue of George Washington in the Public Garden, Boston, sculpted by Thomas Bell in 1869, is a copy of a revolutionary leader who was present in the history of American independence, namely General Colonel George Washington (1732-1799). Ratna (2013) revealed that literary structures such as characterization, setting, themes, and so on are the result of the author's interaction with the real world. Literary works are not born naturally, but they appear as the author's response to the totality of human life. This response indicates that literary works have genetics in human sociological life. In this article, American Dreams, which are part of the social values of the American nation, are set as a literary research issue in the novel *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. The stages of literary sociology research used refer to the concepts of Faruk (2014) and Ratna (2013) which are constructed as follows: 1) Determine and understand the fictional narrative in selected literary works such as the novel *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. 2) Explore the social background of a particular society in a literary narrative which is built from structural elements in the literary work, such as the social setting of the novel *My Antonia*, namely the American frontier community. 3) Explore certain issues in the social life of society which are documented in literary works, for example the issue of American Dreams in American frontier community which can be traced in the narrative of the novel *My Antonia*. 4) Integrating social facts with fictional narratives such as integrating American Dreams in American frontier community with the narrative of the novel *My Antonia*. 5) Make the conclusion of social values documented in literary works such as the values of American Dreams in American frontier community in the novel *My Antonia* by Willa Cather.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

The novel *My Antonia* is analyzed by using the concept of literary sociology and the results of research on the novel are presented descriptively-qualitatively. The sociological issue explored in the narrative of this novel is the American Dreams of the American frontier community which is constructed in three parts, namely the synopsis of the novel *My Antonia*, then the concept of American Dreams, documentation of the American Dream on the frontiers community in the novel *My Antonia*, and finally the conclusion.

#### **3.1. The Synopsis of the Novel *My Antonia***

James Qualey, nicknamed Jim, was a successful lawyer who became a legal consultant for the Western Railways Company in New York City. On a train trip through Iowa to Chicago, he reminisced about his childhood decades in a frontier community in the farming village of Hastings, Black Hawk area, Nebraska, playing with children his age and the most memorable in his memory was a young girl named Antonia. Other friends are Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, Yulka, Anna, and others. Those who were still children played under the hot sun and buried in piles of corn kernels, enjoyed the summer when the wheat harvest arrived, played in the snow in the middle of winter, and ran across the meadows. Since becoming an orphan at the age of eleven, James has been cared for by his grandparents, namely Grandfather or Mr. Burden and Grandmother or Mrs. Burden. They come from England who came to the frontier region since the beginning of the 19th century. Their neighbors were generally Bohemians from Austria, Sweden, Norway and Scandinavia such as the Shimerda family. This family has three children, namely Ambrosch, Antonia, and Yulka. Frontier communities from heterogeneity backgrounds of ethnics, languages, and cultures can live in harmony and peace.

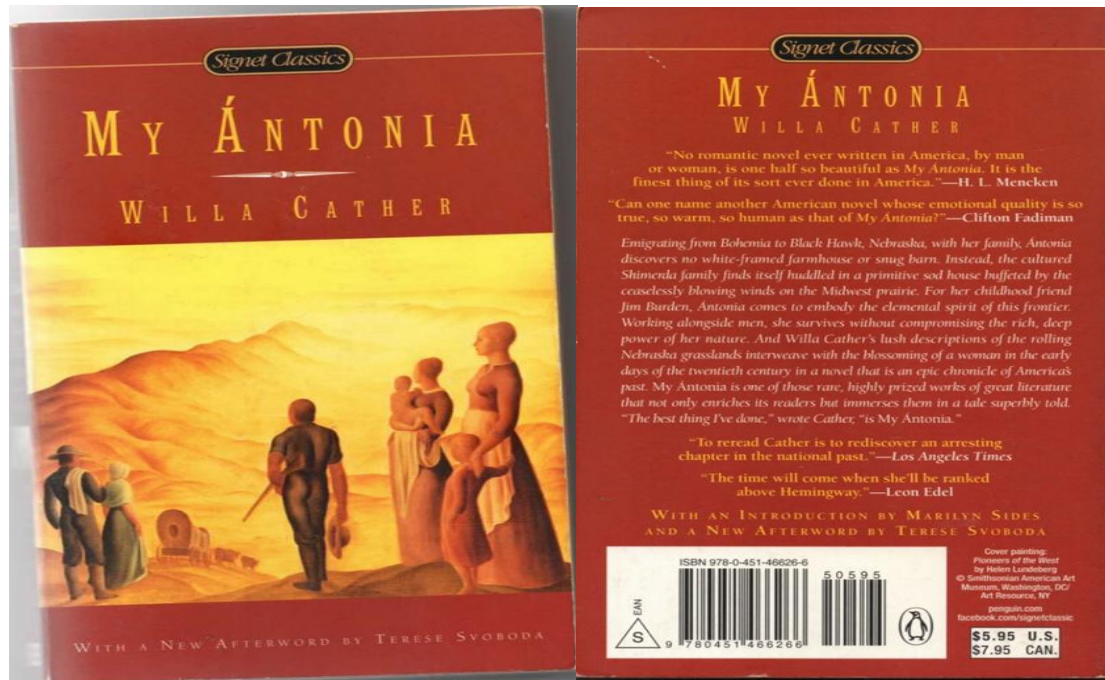


Figure 1. The novel *My Ántonia* was written by Willa Cather in 1918 which published by Signet Classic, New York in 2014

Mr. Shimerda died when his children were still small so Mrs. Shimerda, Ambrosch, and Antonia have to work hard to provide for this family. The close relationship between the families of Burden and Shimerda became James also near to Antonia, "How good it was to have Antonia near us again; to see her every day and almost every night!" (Cather, 2014, p. 111). Jim then moved to Black Hawk City to follow his grandparents. Several months later, Antonia and her friends from the Hastings farm village came to work in Black Hawk as hired girls. They are fascinated by the progress of life and prosperity of people in the city and imagine becoming successful women, especially in meeting economic needs. Antonia worked at the Harling family's house, but then she moved to work for a loan shark named Wick Cutter or Wycliffe to gain social freedom. Antonia's soul and physical appearance changed from a domestic woman to a public woman after getting to know the frenetic world with her friends such as Lena, Tiny, Anna, and others. Their dress resembles that of classy women, wearing gloves, high shoes, wearing hats, going to parties and picnics.

Several women from farming areas who became hired girls succeeded in realizing their dreams, such as Lena Lingard owning a boutique shop in Lincoln City, Tiny Soderball becoming a gold entrepreneur in San Francisco, and others. Antonia changed jobs, experienced failure in various romantic relationships with men, and her marriage to Larry Donovan fell apart, she finally returned to the farm in Hastings. Antonia starts a new life as a successful farmer after she fails to realize her dreams in the city. She then built a household with her new husband, Cuzak. They lived happily and had many children, namely Rudolph, Anton, Yulka, Nina, Leo, Anna, Charley, Jan, and Lucie. At the end of the story, Jim visits the frontier community in Hastings and he witnesses Antonia's happiness with her husband and children.

### 3.2. American Dreams

European immigrants came to the northern continent of America since the beginning of the 17th century as the first wave of frontier communities to settle on the eastern coast of America or old nations. Then in the 19th century immigrants from various nations such as Europe and Asia came in large numbers with very heterogeneous language, religious, and cultural backgrounds. They are known as the second wave of frontier communities that dominate settlements in western America or new countries. The land of hopes and dreams occupied by the first and second wave frontiers is known as the United States of America (USA) today. The tendencies and characteristics of the immigrant community groups can be divided into four categories, namely loyalists, materialists, spiritualists, and intellectualists. All groups came with hopes and ideals accumulated in a great ideology called the American Dreams in building the glory, majesty, and greatness of the United States of America.

America's progress and hegemony since the beginning of the 20th century after World War I until today was an accumulation of superior human and natural resources built from the spirit of the American Dreams. This spirit binds common ideals to unite the heterogeneity of the American people into a superior nation in various aspects such as economic, monetary, military, political, technological, and so on. Steel Henry (1992) mentions ten main elements of American cultural values that form the spirit of the American Dreams, namely: 1) Liberty; 2) Democracy; 3) Equality; 4) Opportunity; 5) Education; 6) Progress; 7) Peace; 8) Mass well-being; 9) No right class stratification; 10) Limited government.



**Figure 2. American Dreams is a spirit of heterogeneity that binds the common ideals of American citizens in building the glory, majesty, and greatness of the United States of America**

(Source: [https://www.google.com/search?q=American+Dreams+pictures&sca\\_esv=a6c39f4d03c5324c&sxsrf](https://www.google.com/search?q=American+Dreams+pictures&sca_esv=a6c39f4d03c5324c&sxsrf), accessed on May 23, 2024)

### 3.3. American Dreams on the Frontiers Community in My Antonia

American Dreams, which are spiritual values in advancing the American nation, are documented in the fictional narrative of the novel *My Antonia*. Characterization phenomena such as Antonia Shimerda, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, James Qualey, Mr. Burden (Grandfather), Mrs. Burden (Grandmother), and others represent the spirit of the American Dreams in American frontier community in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. There are 7 of 10 American Dreams can be identified in novel *My Antonia* such as Liberty, Democracy, Equality, Opportunity, Education, Progress, and Peace.

#### a. Liberty

Liberty is interpreted an individual's right to determine for himself/herself on how to organize the life. Antonia Shimerda attempts to determine her own path in life when her father dies as a hired girl in the town of Black Hawk. She changed professions and jobs from a dancer to a hotel waitress. Likewise, other young girls are Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, Anna, and others. They continue to try to make their dreams come true, even though old people like Mr. Burden, Mrs. Burden, and Mrs. Harling disliked the young girls' freedom in public relations because they considered their behavior immoral. For example, Mrs. Harling after many times advised Antonia to live a good life, but she still persisted in her freedom as a dancer. Mrs. Harling finally threw Antonia out of the house, "This is the end of it, to-night. It stops, short. You can quit going to these dances, or you can hunt another place. Think it over" (Cather, 2014, p. 145).

The spirit of freedom in young girls in frontier community enables them to find their way in life. Lena Lingard, who was previously known as a trouble maker, is now successfully managing a sewing business and boutique in Lincoln. Tiny Soderball, who was once reviled for working for Mrs. Gardener at the hotel, now makes a lot of money managing a gold buying and selling business in San Francisco. Antonia, who made freedom a valuable life experience, finally returned to Hastings as a successful farmer. She lives happily with her husband and children in a farming village.

b. Democracy

Democracy is the freedom to exercise the rights to live as an independent person without pressure, without repressive measures, without intimidation, without threats of violence, without criminalization, and so on. The democratic value is implemented very well in the farming village of Hastings, which is reflected in the freedom of people to express their opinions and be calm in their activities, like the Burden family and other families. The Shimerda family often hunts wild animals such as bison, rabbits, and manages their agricultural land with various crops such as wheat, corn, potatoes, pumpkins, strawberries, beans, and others because they are free to carry out activities on their own land. Likewise, the Burden family, who work as farmers and ranchers, are able to manage their business professionally and increase their income because they are free to exercise their rights as citizens of the new American country of Nebraska. Independence, which is the main value of democracy, is felt by people in various professions in America's frontier communities, "They were always ready to forget their troubles at home, and to run away with me over the prairie, scaring rabbits or starting up flocks of quail" (Cather, 2014, p. 29).

c. Equality

Equality is meant as equal treatment without distinction between ethnic, language, cultural, group, race, gender and other backgrounds in accessing various aspects of life. Frontier community life reflects equality behind the heterogeneity of people from Anglo-American, Bohemian, Scandinavian, Slavic and other backgrounds. Mr Burden or Grandfather from an Anglo-American background does not view himself as superior to Mr. Shimerda is of Bohemian ethnicity. Likewise, Mr. Shimerda from a Bohemian background did not discriminate against Krajiek who came from a Slavic background. The wealthy Burden family does not look down on Mr. Shimerda's poor. These two families live in harmony as neighbors, helping each other, visiting each other every weekend, exchanging gifts every Christmas and New Year celebrations. The Shimerda family is having economic difficulties because their livestock died, Mr. Burden then lent his cow to be used and milked by Mr. Shimerda for a year. Mr Burden then gave the cow to Mrs. Shimerda to support his life when Mr. Shimerda dies. The value of equality which is built on the spirit of togetherness and mutual cooperation was also demonstrated by the frontier community in Hastings when they worked together to build and repair the Shimerda family house, "The Shimerdas were in their new log house by then. The neighbors had helped them to build it in March. It stood directly in front of their old cave, which they used as a cellar. The family were now fairly equipped to begin their struggle to the soil" (Cather, 2014, p. 87).

d. Opportunity

Opportunity can be interpreted as a strong will to take advantage of opportunities and chances to realize hopes and dreams. People must have equal opportunities to develop themselves and compete in a healthy manner to achieve their dreams. Frontier communities are known as hard workers who take advantage of opportunities in nature to meet their daily needs, such as building settlements, clearing land, doing business, raising livestock, hunting and exploring mining products. Mr Burden and Mrs. Burden was part of a group of pioneers who were the first generation of frontiers in the Nebraska region who took advantage of the opportunity to cultivate fields on large areas of land, raise livestock on large areas of pasture land, and open agricultural and livestock businesses. Young people who are the second and third generations inherit the spirit of hard work which is the main driver of opportunity value. The frontier generation such as Jim Qualey, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, and others worked hard to take advantage of opportunities amidst social change and modern progress, "At last he tapped his way up, after bowing to everybody, docile and happy. I walked home with Antonia" (Cather, 2014, p. 135).

e. Education

Education can be interpreted as the spirit of seeking knowledge and building intellectual capacity in creating innovations in science, technology, culture, law, economics, social sciences, and other knowledge to support the nation's independence and progress. James Qualey represents himself as a frontier generation who actively pursues knowledge in formal education up to university and obtains specific knowledge in the field of law. He then dedicated his scientific specifications as a Legal Consultant to the Western Railways Railway Company in New York, "He is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways, and is sometimes away from his New York office for weeks together" (Cather, 2014, p. 3). This company plays a major role in opening transportation access from the east coast of America in the Atlantic Ocean to the west coast of America in the Pacific Ocean so that the western region is no longer isolated from the eastern region. Opening access to transportation accelerates economic progress, facilities, and infrastructure because the circulation of goods and services can take place quickly. In the end, educational progress and superior resource capacity are important assets in imaging America as a developed and prosperous country.

f. Progress

Progress means an effort to actualize one's potential and talents to achieve progress in life. Antonia, from a Bohemian family background, expressed her talent as a dancer who successfully performed at various events under the guidance of Mrs. Vannis and Larry Donovan, "IT WAS AT the Vannis' tent that Antonia was discovered... The Vannis often said that Antonia was the best dancer of them all" (Cather, 2014, p. 144). Then Lena Lingard from a Norwegian family background succeeded in developing her boutique business spirit in Lincoln. Furthermore, Tiny Soderball from a Scandinavian family background succeeded in actualizing her business talents in the gold business in San Francisco after ten years of struggling in the largest gold mine in Klondike, Canada. Jim Qualey, who has an English family background, has succeeded in demonstrating his intellectual capacity as a legal consultant in New York City after studying for decades at formal educational institutions. This progress value is actualized from America's willingness to accept all talents who have the potential to advance the country from any group and from any national background.

g. Peace

Peace is interpreted as a strong desire to safeguard human rights and create a peaceful atmosphere in people's lives as an embodiment of the universal security of humanity on this earth. The value of peace is reflected in the resolution of various conflicts in relationships between characters such as Jake Marpole versus Ambrosch Shimerda, Mrs. Harling versus Antonia, Larry Donovan versus Antonia, Mr. Wick Cutter versus Mrs. Cutter, and other conflicts. Jake Marpole's fight with Ambrosch Shimerda was sparked by Jake's accusation that his horse's saddle was stolen by Ambrosch. This conflict was reconciled by the Grandfather which ended with reconciliation between the Burden family and the Shimerda family. Grandfather even handed over a cow to Mrs. Shimerda as a sign of friendship between the two families, "You need not pay me anything more; no more money. The cow is yours" (Cather, 2014, p. 96). Another conflict is that Antonia is angry with Mrs. Harling because she was prohibited from being active in various dance performances and singing concerts which were considered by Mrs. Harling as immorality and inappropriate association for a good girl like Antonia, "I wouldn't think of it for a minute! My own father couldn't make me stop! Mr Harling ain't my boss outside my work" (Cather, 2014, p. 145). The resolution of this conflict was mediated by Grandmother who returned Antonia from Mr. Wick Cutter. The key value of Peace for America is preventing violence and resolving all forms of conflict on the basis of upholding human rights.

#### 4. Conclusion

Literary works as imaginative works document certain social issues absorbed by the author from his/her sociological life in a particular community. This article presents the issue of American Dreams values in the novel *My Antonia* which are absorbed from Willa Cather's sociological experience in American frontier communities in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Researchers found 7 out of 10 American Dreams values in the spirit of American frontier people as documented in the novel *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. The American Dreams values include Liberty, Democracy, Equality, Opportunity, Education, Progress, and Peace. Liberty is an individual's right to determine for himself/herself on how to organize the life. Democracy is the freedom to exercise the rights to live as an independent person without pressure, without repressive measures, without intimidation, without threats of violence, without criminalization, and so on. Equality is equal treatment without distinction between ethnic, language, cultural, group, race, gender, and other backgrounds in accessing various aspects of life. Opportunity is the strong will to take advantage of opportunities and chances to realize hopes and dreams. Education is the spirit of seeking knowledge and building intellectual capacity in creating innovations in science, technology, culture, law, economics, social sciences, and other sciences to support the nation's independence and progress. Progress is actualizing one's potential and talents to achieve progress in life. Peace is protecting human rights and creating a peaceful atmosphere in people's lives as an embodiment of the universal security of humanity on this earth.

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