

The Same Story, Different Revelations—A Comparative Study of *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom* in the View of Initiation Story

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Abstract: Although the well-known American female writer Willa Cather and the famous Australian female writer Henry Handel Richardson come from different countries, both of their works *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom* describe the process of female growth. Adopting the method of comparative literature, this thesis analyzes and compares the two novels from the perspective of initiation story.

Keywords: *O, Pioneers!*, *The Getting of Wisdom*, initiation story, open endings

One of Cather's pioneering stories, *O, Pioneers!*, describes that the female pioneers pursue their identities for the whole life and find their spiritual homeland on the prairie after overcoming a series of ordeals given by nature and people around them. Similarly, Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom*, in accordance with her own experiences, tells that the heroine undergoes a great deal of tortuous difficulties in the growing process and becomes a hypocritical and socialized adult from an innocent and optimistic girl step by step.

Although both Cather's *O, Pioneers!* and Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* conform to the characteristics of initiation story, they lay different emphasis on the female growth. Cather praises female pioneers' tenacious pioneering spirit in the growing process, while Richardson focuses on the development of female personalities influenced by various disadvantageous elements. As a result, the two heroines present completely different growth endings: one is gaining maturity and becomes a positive pioneering female, and the other is losing innocence and becomes a hypocritical social female. Therefore, this thesis makes a comparative study on *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom* in the aspects of themes of initiation story, including growth, autobiography and epiphany as well as structures and revelations of initiation story, including the general pattern, initiation mentor and open-ending specifically to reveal that the similar growing stories can produce different endings and revelations.

1. Theoretical framework

Initiation, as a common and necessary life period, has strong and powerful cultural metaphor. Some writers consider that the enlightenment of life could stand for the enlightenment of one nation, even of human beings, which is accepted widely.

1.1 Initiation Story in America

Being different from the Bildungsroman, the Initiation story also has a major status in American Literature. The initiation is from the Latin word "Initiatio" that means the beginning or entering. The society and other people educate and affect the protagonists unconsciously, directly and negatively.

1.2 Initiation Story in Australia

Just like America, the history of Australia is also quite short with only about 220 years since the English colonists set their foot on the continent in 1788. Being a colonial country, the Australian people have been trying to pursue their national identity like the Americans. Both the adolescents and the majority of adults are concerned with the matter of pursuit for self-identity and development.

1.3 The Themes of Initiation Story

In the respect of theme, we can see following characteristics of initiation story. First of all, the common theme of initiation story is initiation which means growth. Secondly, one of the obvious themes of the initiation story is the autobiographical element. The last one is the theme of epiphany. There are two major patterns of epiphany in the initiation story. One is the protagonists have the reflections spontaneously during the daily life and the other one is some shocked events wake them up mentally, but which are often bad, terrible and tragic.

2. The themes of initiation story in *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*

The writer will analyze Willa Cather's *O, Pioneers!* and Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* from the angle of initiation theme and display those two works are typical initiation story and they have some similarities.

2.1 The Heroines' Growth in *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*

Alexandra, the heroin of *O, Pioneers!*, pursues herself in her own lifetime and seeks out spiritual home and garden in the grassland after studious efforts and struggles. And it is also true of Laura who is another heroin in *The Getting of Wisdom*. As a typical initiation story, *The Getting of Wisdom* distinguishes itself in the theme of initiation. Laura grows from a girl of twelve years old to a young maiden through her years in the boarding school. Her body stretches out and matures.

2.1.1 Alexandra's Economical Independence and Laura's Spiritual Growth

Though Alexandra and Laura acquire growth, their growing ways and performances are totally different for having different family backgrounds, surroundings and personalities.

O, Pioneers! vividly describes the Swedish immigrant girl Alexandra Bergson's persistent struggle and pursuit, presenting her unique emotional and social experience as well as her views on life. The novel praises highly of the unyielding spirit, everlasting passion and positive attitudes towards life of early American pioneers represented by Alexandra. She has grown from an inexperienced, poor immigrant girl to a thoroughly knowledgeable, confident and wealthy adult farmer owning the richest farms on the Divide.

As a typical initiation story, Henry Handle Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* demonstrates the initiation theme not only in her growth in body but more in her inner world. The heroin of the novel, Laura, grows from a girl of twelve to a young maiden through her years in the boarding school. She was an unsophisticated, imaginative, optimistic and rebellious girl. But after she enters the Presbyterian college for girls and becomes a resident student, all of her natural and spontaneous behavior and thinking are facing great challenge of code of conduct and the mode of thinking. Living in the particular social circle, she becomes a wired person who is against the grain. She begins to grow up mentally in the process of getting in touch with others little by little.

2.1.2 Alexandra's Transition to Spiritual Pursuits and Laura's Adaptation to Social Conducts

Getting the successful independence of economy, Alexandra starts to grow up in spirits, especially in emotion, while Laura realizes and learns to change her attitude and behavior to adapt to the requirements of the boarding school and the society. During the process, Alexandra obtains her spiritual independence and Laura learns how to control her behaviors to adapt to the society.

2.2 The Epiphany Theory of Initiation Story in *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*

The word epiphany stems from *Bible* which refers to Jesus Christ appearing in front of The Three Magi all of a sudden after his birth. The core of epiphany is that arts processes the details of life thus it draws readers into the realm of spiritual insight to produce suddenly enlightened result. And there are two types of epiphany in the initiation story, which are the spontaneous epiphany that achieved by the hero himself through ordinary life, and the shocking epiphany that is brought about by the shocking events that happen outside.

2.2.1 The Sublimation of Alexandra's Soul in *O, Pioneers!*

According to the development of Alexandra's female trait and her cognition of the earth, the process

of her epiphany, or awakening can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, Alexandra is a tall and unstained girl with snow-white skin and black hair. But her attitude to the land is far from love and respect. In the second stage, Alexandra gains generous material benefits and becomes quite wealthy. That means that Alexandra gets the harmony with nature in the end.

2.2.2 The Final Awakening of Laura in *The Getting of Wisdom*

In *The Getting of Wisdom*, both of the two types of epiphany play important roles in the growing process of Laura. The case in point is what Laura feels about Miss Hicks who is the visiting governess for geography. Laura changes a lot after that, so does her point of view on knowledge. Another shocking epiphany for Laura is going with a young boy to a Cricket-match. She does her best to talk to him but only gets indifferent and simple replies.

3. Different reflections on the same growing story

Based on the above analysis, the two novels from the themes of initiation story, *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom* can be categorized as initiation story in terms of initiation themes, autobiographical elements and epiphany theories. Nevertheless, for the two heroines, although they seem to grow up along the same road, they still pay different prices for their respective growth.

3.1 The General Pattern of Initiation Story in *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*

O, Pioneers! and *The Getting of Wisdom* follow such a plot pattern. *O, Pioneers!* is about a young girl's growth in the process of pioneering while *The Getting of Wisdom* is about a teenage girl's initiation in a boarding school.

The first stage is temptation. The second one is leaving home. The third one is ordeal. The fourth phase is puzzlement. The last stage is epiphany. To draw the conclusion, the plot patterns of the two novels, *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*, exactly follow the general pattern of the initiation story. Both of the heroines experience temptation. Alexandra is attracted by the wild land while Laura desires to go to the boarding school.

3.2 Different Influences made by the Initiation Mentors on the Process of Growth in *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*

In *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*, there also are kinds of mentors for Alexandra and Laura separately. But the difference lies in the property of mentors. The guides who influence Alexandra greatly are positive, but for Laura are mostly opposite.

3.2.1 The Positive Mentors for Alexandra

During the process of Alexandra's pioneering and the change of attitude to nature, the two mentors, Ivar and Maire who tend to be positively, play such an important role for Alexandra that she begins to identify, feel and love nature.

3.2.2 The Negative Mentors for Laura

The people around Laura who influence her most are nearly negative mentors, especially the teachers and classmates in her boarding school. Experiencing many embarrassments and taunts, she changes gradually and becomes increasingly sensible in her attitude towards the society. She limits and controls her own opinions and conducts which are always blamed by her teachers and classmates to adapt to the surrounding and society. Actually, it is a tragic of losing innocence and the various elements in Laura's growth produce harmful effects on her world outlook and personality.

3.3 Different Reflections on *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*

Another feature of the structure of the initiation story is the open-ending. Writers of the initiation story often prefer an open-ending to a clear description of their protagonists' destinations and always give readers different reflections.

3.3.1 Alexandra's Gain of Maturity

In *O, Pioneers!*, the relationship between Alexandra and nature experiences three different phases. The first one is doing pioneering work. After investigates from other river land, she decides to take root

in this land because she thinks “this land is too rich, strong and glorious.”(Cather 1989:41) The second phase is adulthood. When Carl is driven away by her selfish brothers, Alexandra gains hope from the power and tender feeling of the land. The illusion which runs through her childhood and adulthood has the meaning of symbol. Then she comes to the third phase. She knows that the land does not belong to anyone. At the end of the novel, the description of Alexandra and Carl leaves us much imagination room to image their love. “They went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star.”(Cather 1989:198)

3.3.2 Laura's Loss of Innocence

The reflection of initiation story in *The Getting of Wisdom* is quite different from *O, Pioneers!*. At the end of *The Getting of Wisdom*, Laura has been successful in getting the “wisdom” which is necessary for her future in the society after graduation. The restrictions on her way to growth have been removed. She gains the maturity about the adult's world but she pays price which is loss of her original innocence. She is a very pure and naive girl when she is a little girl. But in the growing process, she gradually loses many of her valuable personalities.

4. Conclusion

As world well-known writers, Willa Cather and Henry Handel Richardson come from different countries and own distinct writing styles, but their works, *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*, can be analyzed by the theory of initiation story in the respects of themes and reflections of initiation story. *O, Pioneers!* discusses the relevance of the inevitable responsibility and happiness. *The Getting of Wisdom* tells about a twelve years old girl, Laura, experiences a series of ordeals in a boarding school and gains the knowledge of getting along with other people in the society. Both of the two novels are initiation stories. They have the general themes of the initiation story, such as growth theme, autobiographical element and epiphany theory. The two heroins in *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom*, Alexandra and Laura, experience many difficulties to get their own initiation. Alexandra realizes the pursuit of identity and the integration with nature in the process of communicating with nature. But Laura grows up and gets the “wisdom” in getting along with people in the society at the price of losing her original innocence. In this thesis, the writer uses the theory of initiation story to analyze the differences and similarities of *O, Pioneers!* and *The Getting of Wisdom* to discuss the different growth results and reflections of the heroins.

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